Nine Years After Establishing a Base in Ishinomaki, How Have We Contributed to the Future of Tohoku? Stakeholder Dialogue 2021

In addition to emergency relief and donation activities, Yahoo Japan Corporation (hereinafter "Yahoo! JAPAN") established the Yahoo! JAPAN Ishinomaki Reconstruction Base (hereinafter "Base") in July 2012 as a base for the Tohoku area, and has been trying to deliver much needed support to the affected areas through trial and error. The initiatives include "Recovery Department Store" (currently Yell Market), "Tour de Tohoku" cycling event, and the launch of "Fisherman Japan", a group of young fishermen. How has Yahoo! JAPAN been able to contribute to the future of Tohoku?

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(Text by alterna, Photography by Keisuke Hirai)
The dialogue was held in Ishinomaki in January 2021. The affiliations and positions of the employees in the text are as of January 2021.

PROFILE

Tokumitsu Kobayashi (General Manager, Department of Fisheries and Forestry Policy, Miyagi Prefecture)
Born in Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture in 1960, he joined the Miyagi Prefectural Government in 1985. At his first post, the Miyagi Fisheries Experiment Station, he conducted research on fishery resources, and at the Fisheries Processing Laboratory, he worked to improve processing technology for fish paste products. After the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, he was in charge of the recovery and reconstruction of the fishery industry as the Manager of the Fisheries Promotion Division. From April 2016, he has been in charge of the recovery, reconstruction and promotion of the fisheries industry as the Deputy General Manager of the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Department. In 2018, he was appointed as the Head of the Eastern Regional Development Office, which has jurisdiction over the Ishinomaki area, and in April 2019, he was appointed as the General Manager of the Department of Fisheries and Forestry Policy, a position he holds to this day.

Takanori Yoshimoto (General Manager, Industry Department, Ishinomaki City)
Joined Ishinomaki City Government in 1980. After working in human resources, the planning department, and the council secretariat, he was assigned to the Industry Department in 2014. He has been involved in business attraction and industrial reconstruction, and was appointed as the General Manager of the Industry Department in 2019, a position he holds to this day.

Shota Abe (Representative Director, Fisherman Japan)
Born in 1986 in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, the son of a fisherman. After graduating from a local high school, he lived in Sendai and Tokyo for five years before returning to his hometown of Kitakamicho Jusanhama, in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, to become a wakame seaweed fisherman. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, he was inspired to revitalize the devastated fishing industry and the region, and together with five families, he established a fishery production cooperative called Hamanto, which is actively engaged in product development and promotion in collaboration with companies. He also established Fisherman Japan in cooperation with young fishermen in Sanriku, and became its representative. He has been working on a number of innovative projects to change the image of the fishing industry into a profitable industry and to foster successors.

Koichi Sunaga (Manager, Tohoku Collaboration, CSR Promotion Office, Social Responsibility Promotion Group, Yahoo Japan Corporation)
Having worked at a department store, joined Yahoo! JAPAN in 2003. After working in the shopping and auction consulting and business development departments, he was appointed to the Reconstruction Support Office in 2012. In July of the

same year, he launched the "Yahoo! JAPAN Ishinomaki Reconstruction Base" and has been working in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture.

Takuya Hasegawa (Tohoku Collaboration, CSR Promotion Office, Social Responsibility Promotion Group, Yahoo Japan Corporation)
After joining Yahoo! JAPAN in 2003, held a number of positions including Senior Manager in charge of commerce. In 2012, after the Great East Japan Earthquake, he moved to Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, where he has been involved in reconstruction support, including the launch of the "Recovery Department Store." In 2014, he established Fisherman Japan with young fishermen to revitalize the fishing industry, a major industry in the region. He has been implementing numerous initiatives to solve various issues facing the fishery industry.

Hand in hand with the community, explored a road to recovery with a base in Ishinomaki

--In July 2012, Yahoo! JAPAN opened Yahoo! JAPAN Ishinomaki Recovery Base (currently Ishinomaki Base) in Tohoku, and has been involved in recovery support. I think it was unusual for a company to set up a base in the disaster area to support reconstruction. What kind of missions did Messrs. Sunaga and Hasegawa have from Yahoo! JAPAN?

Sunaga: Yahoo! JAPAN upheld a new mission in 2012: to become "a problem solving engine that solves social issues with the power of IT and the Internet."

Under this new mission, we considered what we, as an IT company, can do to contribute to the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. The "Recovery Support Office" was newly established and Hasegawa and I were assigned to this office in April and this is when our activities began.

Initially, we were not thinking of setting up a base of operations, but after visiting various areas affected by the disaster and searching for the ideal form of reconstruction support, we came to the conclusion that we should set up a base in the affected area and work together with the local people to provide reconstruction support.

The decision to locate the base in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, was made after considering the following factors: (1) the size of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and the production value of each municipality, (2) the number of employees and the number of people engaged in industries, and (3) the scale of damage.

Sunaga (Manager, Tohoku Collaboration, CSR Promotion Office, Social Responsibility Promotion Group, Yahoo Japan Corporation)

-- As an IT company, I think there are many things you can do to help remotely, but setting up a base in Ishinomaki was an unexpected decision.

Hasegawa: At that time, we were working in departments that sold products online such as Yahoo! JAPAN Shopping and Yahoo! JAPAN Auction (currently, YAHUOKU!). From these experiences, we launched an EC website that sold products from Tohoku, "Recovery Department Store (currently, Yell Market)" in December 2011. However, there were many things that we did not know about the affected areas, and we felt that there were limitations to our ability to provide support remotely.

We wanted to contribute with our skills and with what only Yahoo! JAPAN can accomplish, and we wanted to do this through our business, not as volunteers. In order to promote recovery with the people in the area using the strength of Yahoo! JAPAN, we judged that it would be better to move to the area, and proposed to open an office.

Both Sunaga and I have been volunteering on our own since right after the earthquake, and we believe that what we saw and heard during our volunteer activities and our relationships with the people of Ishinomaki led us to this project.

The power of the government is limited; reconstruction support must be provided through public-private partnerships

--In 2012, it was probably more of a "recovery" phase than a "reconstruction" phase. Mr. Yoshimoto, from the perspective of the Ishinomaki City Industry Department, and Mr. Kobayashi, from the perspective of the Miyagi Prefecture Fisheries Department, how did you perceive Yahoo! JAPAN's efforts?

Yoshimoto: At the time of the earthquake, I was working in the Human Resources Section doing internal administrative work, so I received requests from many companies to help with disaster relief as part of

their CSR (corporate social responsibility). In 2012, there were still piles of rubble, and there were no words like "reconstruction" or "industrial revival."

After I was transferred to the Industrial Division, I became involved with Yahoo! JAPAN's reconstruction support, and I don't think there has ever been a company that has taken on the initiatives with such a deep root in the community.
We civil servants also felt that there was very little we could do, that the power of the government was limited, and that things could not move forward without the help of various people. After the earthquake, I began to think that instead of doing things in a bureaucratic way as before, I would borrow the help of the private sector.

Mr. Yoshimoto (General Manager, Industry Department, Ishinomaki City)

Kobayashi: Miyagi Prefecture, which was the second largest fishery prefecture after Hokkaido, suffered devastating damage and the future was uncertain. Ishinomaki is blessed with an abundance of marine products, and the area off Kinkasan is one of the world's three largest fishing grounds. Many fishermen liked to be self-willed and independent, and the climate was not conducive to working with others.

From a public administrative standpoint, I thought that reconstruction would be difficult unless we had collaborations. In the field of fishery processing, we were able to collaborate across regions, but in the field of fishery, the issue at the time was how to collaborate across regions.

Under such circumstances, Fisherman Japan was launched with the support of Yahoo! JAPAN. A cross-regional collaboration, led by young people, began to take root. I am looking forward to their initiatives to foster successors and the future development of this project.

Mr. Kobayashi (General Manager, Fisheries and Forestry Policy Department, Miyagi Prefecture)

--Mr. Abe is also a wakame seaweed fisherman, and together with Yahoo! JAPAN, you launched "Fisherman Japan," a group of young fishermen who aim for the "new 3Ks (in Japanese)": cool, profitable, and innovative.

Abe: In the summer of 2011, when I was living in temporary housing and decided to continue fishing even after the disaster, I had a vague idea that I didn't want to work in the old fishing industry and that I wanted to change something about it. I had experience as a salaried worker in Tokyo, so I felt that being a fisherman was not so rewarding even before the disaster, considering the working hours and the nature of the work.

I lost my house in the disaster, and I knew that even if I got subsidies to fish, I would be tens of millions of yen in debt, so the hurdles to restarting my fishing business were high. Still, I was determined to continue fishing and was looking for some new way to do it.
I met Mr. Hasegawa shortly before the Base was established. After harvesting the wakame seaweed we had cultivated, we were looking for ways to expand our sales channels. When Mr. Hasegawa approached me, I was like, "Yes!"

Mr. Abe (Representative Director, Fisherman Japan)

Hasegawa: One of the themes of the "Recovery Department Store" was "selling products while sending out positive information."

I was told that selling fishery products online is difficult, but after listening to Mr. Abe and others in the fishery industry, I felt I had no choice but to try. I also hoped that I could leave something behind after the recovery, such as human resource development and IT promotion.

Still, I once felt hopeless. When I was standing in the middle of piles of rubble and burnt-out fields in Kesennuma with an extremely large ship washed ashore, I was stunned and wondered if it was really possible to sell online.

From a closed environment to one where "change" and "challenge" are the norm

--For the past 10 years, Yahoo! JAPAN has been focusing on reconstruction assistance, but how have you been able to contribute to the affected areas?

Yoshimoto: I'm sure there were some hardships because there is a culture of "not accepting outsiders," but Mr. Sunaga, Mr. Hasegawa, and the other members of the Base blended into the community and worked hard. We were able to build a relationship of trust with Yahoo! JAPAN, to the point where we felt we could entrust the community to Yahoo! JAPAN. I believe that their efforts and attitude to be recognized by the local people were something that no other company could offer.

And spiky activities like Fisherman Japan could not have been done from the government's perspective. The fostering of new fishermen in the fishery industry is an advanced initiative that we can be proud of to the whole of Japan, and it has become a model for human resource development.
Kobayashi: I am grateful for events such as cycling event, "Tour de Tohoku", and "Reborn-Art Festival," as it is not easy to build friendships and human relationship rooted in the community. From now on, I think we need to work on human resource development and IT together.

Abe: Looking back over the past 10 years, the biggest change for Miyagi and for the fisheries industry is that it has become commonplace to change and to take on challenges. The Tohoku region is renowned for being extremely closed off, and I used to feel that I couldn't do anything if I stayed in my hometown, but now I think many people, not just me, have become aware that we can do something big.

We want to create a culture where people feel that it is okay to take on new challenges, and we want to make sure that we have many options when problems arise. Particularly now, there are many natural disasters, and the seawater temperature is rising, affecting production quantity. With the spread of the new coronavirus, the future is unclear, but what we have learned over the past 10 years is helping us now.

It is difficult for one person to continue working alone, and it is only through continued efforts that people around you become aware of your activities and change their awareness, so I think it is really thanks to Yahoo! JAPAN's support that we were able to continue our activities.

Using Ishinomaki as a model, thinking about the future of Tohoku

--What has Yahoo! JAPAN gained from being based in Ishinomaki and continuing to support the recovery? How has it been applied to your own work?

Hasegawa: It was an experience that I couldn't have gained just by working on a computer. Building the relationships necessary to make things happen, and searching for the optimal process while listening to the opinions of various people, was something completely different from my previous work.

When we conducted an internal survey to mark the 10-year anniversary of the disaster, we found that more and more employees were interested in volunteering and other activities. I feel that priceless value, not just sales and profits, has accumulated and spread within the company. Through our activities, we learned about the commitment of producers, the relationship between Tokyo and the countryside, and the value of the countryside.

Hasegawa (Tohoku Collaboration, CSR Promotion Office, Social Responsibility Promotion Group, Yahoo Japan Corporation)

Sunaga: On a personal note, it was a true learning experience, and I feel that my life has been enriched.

Of course, there have been changes as a company as well. Originally, Yahoo! JAPAN had strict security and no open space, but the Ishinomaki Base became the prototype for the open collaboration space "LODGE" that is now in our Tokyo office. In a sense, it was like a test bed for a new way of office and working.

I believe that we were able to show a new workstyle to our employees, young and old. The people of Tohoku and we have influenced each other and this has created changes within Yahoo! JAPAN.

--On the tenth anniversary of the earthquake, the role of the Base is coming to an end. I'm sure your relationship with Yahoo! JAPAN will continue, but what are your future plans?

Yoshimoto: In the past 10 years, the hardware side of reconstruction has progressed, and I believe that we will be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel in about two years. However, although it may look as if reconstruction has been completed, there are still problems such as elderly people living alone in reconstruction housing, and it seems that reconstruction in the true sense of the word will still be a long way off.

Memory of the disaster fading away is inevitable, but I'm not worried because I believe that Yahoo! JAPAN will continue to be connected to Ishinomaki.

Related link

- Working for Recovery from Great East Japan Earthquake - Yahoo! JAPAN's Initiatives in Chronological Order
- Working for Recovery from Great East Japan Earthquake - Yahoo! JAPAN's Initiatives Seen from Data
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