

Voices from Fukushima Supplemental Material

Concepts and Glossary

When there is a disaster that causes loss, disruption, and suffering, we have a human tendency to look for who is to blame and to think that the victims are very different from us. Even within Japan, people have distanced themselves from the environmental refugees and from the farmers who have stayed on radiation contaminated land. Perhaps that insulates us from fearing that such a calamity could happen here. If people's thinking stops there, however, it gets in the way of investigating a problem and seeking solutions. It also prevents us from appreciating the sacrifices and achievements of those affected by the event to see them just as victims.

Through these lessons, students will encounter faraway Fukushima, Japan as a relateable place. They will picture the mountains and countryside. They will see and hear the people talking about their experience and aspirations in subtitled original documentary video.

This unit is meant to open discussion of the trade-off of environmental risk for affordable power. With a far off event as the case to study, students will be more free to think about questions of the political influence of the nuclear industry than they would if the question were raised closer to home. Rather than teaching an explicit set of concepts, these lessons require students to listen and analyse the statements of their classmates and diverse people from Japan and around the world.

Japanese Glossary

akabeko – a lacquered papier mache toy in the shape of a red ox. Its head is a separate weighted piece suspended on a string so that it bobs up and down and side-to-side. They are made in a few family run shops in Aizu-Wakamatsu City and have come to symbolize the northeastern region hit by the earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. Originally they were a charm against smallpox in the 1700's. They represent the Buddhist story of a red ox used in the construction of a temple. When the building was done, the faithful ox refused to leave the temple grounds. The legend says that when it died its soul went straight to nirvana.

ryokan – a Japanese style inn. One removes one's shoes at the entrance. Slippers are worn in wooden floored hallways. The rooms have tatami mat floors, made of tightly woven sea grass that has a clean, pleasant smell. There one goes in stocking feet. A cotton kimono is provided for each guest. Bedding is a cotton stuffed mattress laid right on the tatami. There is a public bath the size of a swimming pool.

matsuri – a local street festival, usually in summer. Their origins are Shinto. They mostly involve bringing the town's harvest spirit down from the mountain, honoring it with a community celebration, and taking it back home happy.

bon dance – In July when they honor the ancestors' spirits, the whole town dances in a big loop, up one side of the street and down the other, to ancient tunes in flutes and drums.

kokeshi doll – a cylindrical wooden doll. Each town has its own pattern that's painted on the body. They are often collected in one's travels, or given as gifts when one comes home.

daruma – a papier mache "weeble" painted as a caricature of a priest who sat in completely focused meditation for years. It comes with blank white eyes and will meditate on your wish if you paint in one pupil. Paint the other eye when your wish comes true.

Tengu – a supernatural mountain creature that confuses travelers.

How I Will Use this Lesson Plan

I teach Japanese language classes. For my own students I will use the picture file. My students will be able to describe the landscapes and souvenirs in Japanese. I will also use segments of Japanese language documentary video that I know the students will understand. The listening to real language on a situation with emotional impact will improve their receptive skills. They will definitely do the akabeko art extension, with directions given in Japanese. Pairing language with hands on activity makes it "stick."

In the past I have visited social studies classes when they are studying Japan to talk about my experience living with a Japanese family and attending a Japanese high school for a year when I was an exchange student in Fukushima Prefecture. I have had them do comparison papers on the lives of American and Japanese teenagers. Now I'll have a new lesson series to offer if my African and Asian History colleagues are interested. This mini-unit would be good for 9th grade Honors African/Asian. Twelfth grade teachers teaching about public policy might be interested, too.