

Memories Search Party

Returning as Many Photos as Possible to the Community



▲ In the work tent, photos are washed and left to dry off.

“Who would have thought that every single thing would be washed away?”

Who would have imagined that more than half of the residents of Minamisanriku would lose their homes and contents, leaving them with nothing but the clothes they were wearing? Photographs that had captured their memories and the very scenery that they had grown to love since their childhood had all disappeared in an instant. They were left with nothing with which to recall the faces of family members they had lost to the tsunami.

At the end of March 2011, volunteers started the work of salvaging from the debris items such as Buddhist memorial tablets, photos, diaries, and stationery and gloves inscribed with names. Named the Memories Search Party, at first this group numbered just seven members. Obata Haruo, a super volunteer hailing from Oita Prefecture in the south of Japan, came to check on the safety of acquaintances. He took part in the search party while living in a tent.

As the days went by, when Self-Defense Forces personnel, firefighters, and police searching for missing people found photos or photo albums amid the rubble, they would carefully place these items in a pile on the side of the road. Volunteers from all over the country came to Minamisanriku and carried on the work of collecting and washing photos each day.

At the end of May 2011, the found items were displayed at an abandoned school in the Iriya district, and the work of returning them to their owners began. A hundred thousand photos and 2,000 photo albums had been rescued. The people of Minamisanriku continued this search for photos of their memories in the abandoned school building.



▲ Residents gaze intently at photos to see if they can find any family members or acquaintances.

Photo courtesy of Minamisanriku Social Welfare Council