

Chapter 10

Conveying and Passing on the Lessons of Minamata Disease

The Lessons of Minamata disease

Having experienced Minamata disease first-hand, we, the citizens of Minamata, believe it is our responsibility to pass on the lessons of this tragedy to all peoples, across Japan, and worldwide. The lessons of Minamata disease serve as a warning, reminding us that tragic pollution disasters such as Minamata disease must never be allowed to reoccur anywhere on this earth.

The lessons of Minamata disease have been interpreted from various perspectives and from different angles. We consider the lesson of environmental protection to be the first among these lessons. We would like this first lesson to be shared by all peoples of the world, and commit ourselves to making it known, just how crucial careful consideration of the environment is.

Minamata Disease Victims Memorial Service

Held on May 1 every year since 1992, the Minamata Disease Victims Memorial Service is conducted on the Minamata Bay Reclaimed Land, the symbolic birthplace of Minamata disease. The service is an opportunity to offer comfort to the souls sacrificed to Minamata disease, to reflect on the environmental havoc we had created, and pledge our commitment to environmental regeneration.

Since 2006 the service has been conducted in front of the Monument Dedicated to Minamata Disease Victims on the Shinsui Boardwalk at Eco Park. The service was attended by patients, family members, the Minister for the Environment, the Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture, representatives of relevant national and prefectural organizations, representatives of Chisso, and many local citizens. Participants prayed for the quiet repose of those sacrificed to Minamata disease, and renewed pledges to pass on the lessons learned from Minamata disease and strive for the rebirth of Minamata.



Memorial Service held in front of the Monument Dedicated to Minamata Disease Victims

Establishment of the Minamata Prize for the Environment

The Minamata Prize for the Environment was established by Minamata City in 1992 to promote activities and research concerning conservation in South-East Asia and Japan, and thereby play a positive role in the preservation and restoration of the environment. As of 2006 (the 9th Minamata Prize for the Environment), the Prize has been awarded to 20 organizations and 6 individuals. In 1997 (the 5th Minamata Prize for the Environment), a special prize for citizens of Minamata (the Prize for Environmental Citizens in Minamata) was added, which has been awarded to 4 organizations and one individual.



The 9th Minamata Prize for the Environment Prize Presentation Ceremony (May, 2007)

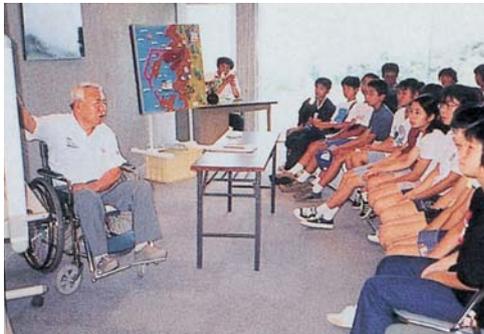
Opening of the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum

Minamata City established the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum in January 1993, to disseminate and pass on the invaluable lessons of Minamata disease as a warning to future generations in the sincere hope that a similar tragedy will never be allowed to occur again.

To promote the correct understanding of the historical and scientific aspects of Minamata disease, the museum displays documents relating to Minamata disease, houses a reference collection including publications and other information, lends out videotapes and display panels, and collects and archives relevant documentation. In addition, a "storyteller service" has been introduced, which allows visitors to learn about Minamata disease directly from Minamata disease patients themselves. The museum is trying to communicate and pass on the experiences and lessons learned from Minamata disease.



Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, located on a hill overlooking Minamata Bay



Storyteller, Mr. Tsuginori Hamamoto speaking to elementary school students.

In recent years, the museum has received more and more praise for its role as an environmental study venue. In 2006, approximately 46,000 people visited the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, including more than 28,000 students from elementary, junior high and high schools. Since its opening, the Museum has had more than 570,000 visitors. (As of September 2007)

Storyteller's Group President - A message from Mr. Tsuginori Hamamoto

"I became a storyteller so that the same kind of environmental destruction that occurred in Minamata will not happen again. In our affluent lifestyle, nature has been contaminated and people's health has been harmed. If we want to have a convenient and prosperous life, we must be grateful for nature's gifts, and not pollute it. Through the storytellers' accounts, I would like people to feel the horror of pollution and learn what people must not do, in order to live in a safe and happy 21st Century."

*With these lessons as a basis, Minamata's primary school students have been communicating with students in Niigata since 2006.

Minamata Memorial

Minamata Memorial was completed in October, 1996, the 40th anniversary of the official discovery of Minamata disease; 1) as a prayer and requiem for those sacrificed to Minamata disease; 2) as a pledge, based on the experience of Minamata disease, to never allow the repetition of such disasters; and 3) so as to pass on the lessons of Minamata disease to future generations.

From 1997 to 2005 the Minamata Disease Victims' Memorial Service is held annually on the Memorial site.



Prayer Fountain and Memorial Spheres on the terraces of Minamata Memorial

Projects relating to Minamata Disease in China

In May 1999, a 30-member delegation including the Mayor of Minamata held the "Minamata Disease Environmental Problems Symposium" and "Minamata Disease Exhibition" in Qinhuangdao City, China. Held on May 4, under the auspices of the School of Chinese Environmental Management, with a view to describing the lessons of Minamata disease and the current situation in Minamata, the symposium attracted 450 citizens, and more than 3,000 people visited the exhibition.

On May 6, the delegation visited the University of Beijing. The Mayor gave a lecture entitled "Experiences and Lessons from Minamata Disease" to 70 students and appealed for environmental awareness.

This example of environmental diplomacy marked a step forward in our effort to pass on to the world the experiences and lessons we have learned from Minamata disease, and established a model for Minamata's continued contribution to the field of international environmentalism.



Minamata Disease Environmental Problems Symposium
(May, 1999)

Hosting Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Training Programs

From 2000 to 2005, the Japan International Cooperation Agency "JICA's Kyushu International Center (located in Kitakyushu city) conducted the first stage of training for Asian environmental administration staff on-site in Minamata. The second stage is being continued for a further five years from the 2005 fiscal year.

Organized under the broad theme of "environmental regeneration and conservation by administration (experiences and lessons from Minamata disease)", approximately one-month long training programs will be held in Minamata, a city striving to become a model environmental city. The training syllabus includes the study of Minamata disease, Minamata's environmental policies and exchanging views with citizens.

In the 2006 fiscal year, nine environmental administration staff members representing national or local governments from Thailand, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Kenya, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam participated in the JICA training.

The Monument dedicated to Victims



The Monument dedicated to Minamata Disease Victims

From 2006 the Minamata Disease Victims Memorial Service has been held in front of the monument dedicated to Minamata disease victims in Eco Park.

50th Anniversary of the Official Confirmation of Minamata Disease

In 2006, Minamata reached the 50th anniversary of official recognition of Minamata disease. On this occasion, 49 representatives of Minamata disease patient groups, citizens' groups, Chisso and the government came together to form the 'Official Confirmation 50th Anniversary Planning Committee, with the aim of encouraging requiem prayers, profound remorse and a new start, and to reflect on the importance of life. The group has implemented approximately 30 programs on the theme of 'Remembrance, Prayer and Towards the Future', such as the Minamata Disease Victims Memorial Service as well as "Live, Minamata", a play that tells the story of congenital Minamata disease sufferers and handicapped people, and the Moyai Day concert involving 1,000 participants.