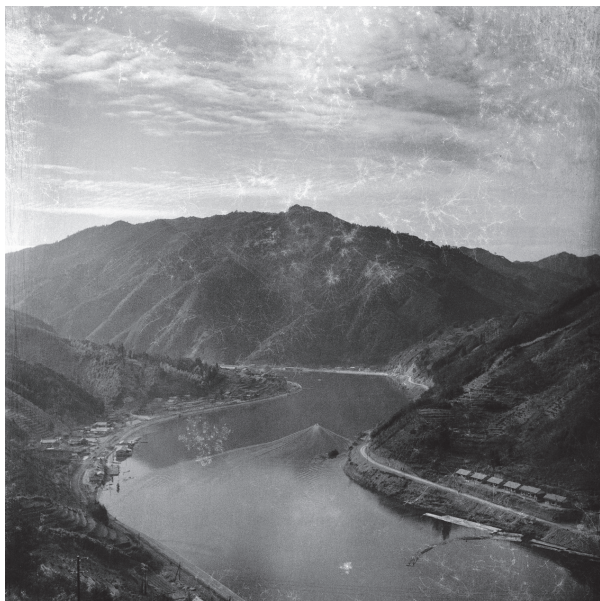


REBORN

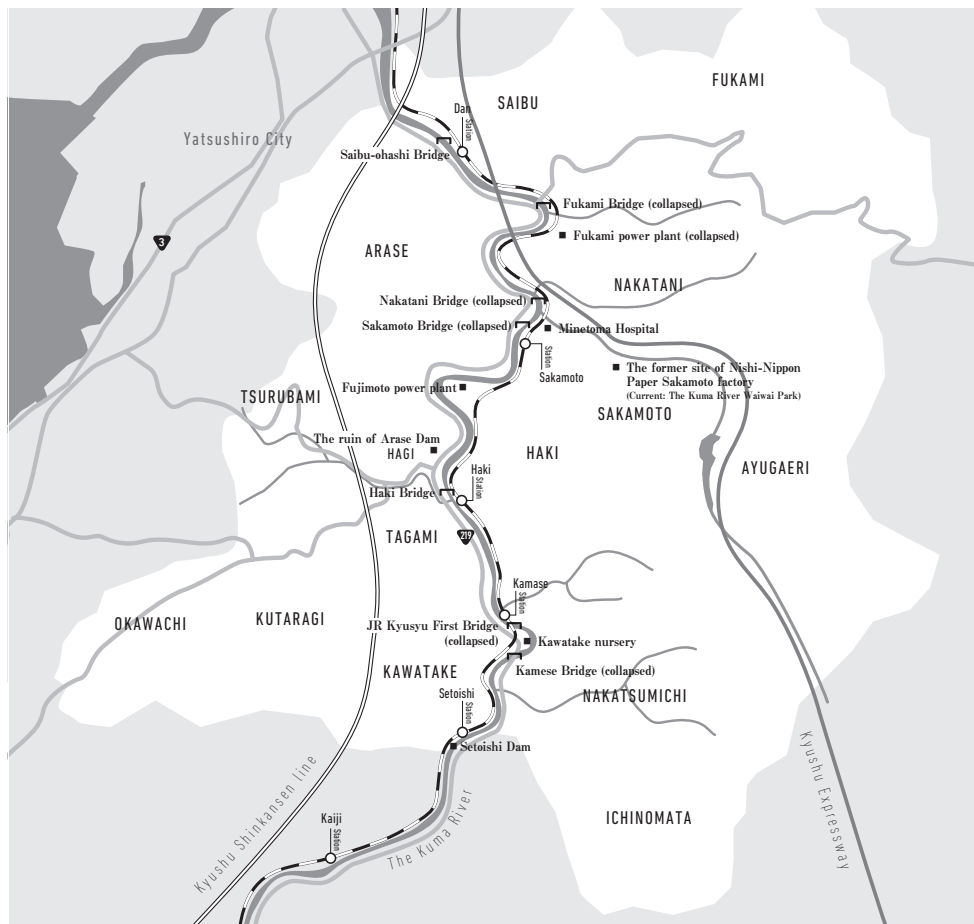


Foreword

The REBORN project aims to preserve old film negatives found in Sakamoto Town in Yatsushiro City by cleaning and digitizing them. The negatives were damaged by a flood during the heavy rain on July 2nd 2020. The REBORN project also aims to give Sakamoto Town a “rebirth,” by creating materials such as exhibitions and books to share the memories of the town.

These film negatives, capturing scenes from the Sakamoto area from the 1950s to the 1990s, were taken by the late local amateur photographers Giichiro Higashi and Takao Motomura. The films were handed to Junpei Mizoguchi, a river guide and the owner of a rafting company called Reborn, who then sorted and kept them.

Most of the films were found submerged after the flood caused by the heavy rain. They were rescued by the “Ametsuchi Volunteer Group,” who organized the relief efforts after the disaster. In this book the photographs are printed as they were found, without retouching the damages (such as discoloring, stains, and corruption of the emulsion layer on the film’s surface) caused by the flood and by the films aging.



The Mountain, The River and Sakamoto Town

In 1961, Sakamoto as a municipality was established as a result of a merger of Kamimatsukuma and Simomatsukuma Villages in the Yatsushiro District, and Kutaragi Village in the Ashikita District. In 2005 Sakamoto merged with Yatsushiro City, and became the current Sakamoto Town in Yatsushiro City in the Kumamoto Prefecture. The Kuma River, running through the central part from south to north, has provided the town with abundant resources. Twelve branches spread out from the river on both sides, and ninety percent of the land is covered by forest. Fishing was popular, offering sweetfish, eels, and much more. On the other hand, the environmental conditions also made it a tough place to live. People survived by dealing with the environment through

techniques such as slash-and-burn farming in the mountains and timber rafting and transportation utilizing the strong current of the Kuma River.

In this book, a photograph captured the last timber rafting in the Kuma river to be unloaded at the left bank of the Arase Dam. This was right after the completion of the dam's construction in 1954. The lifestyle of the people in the area has been changing – transportation on the river dwindled after the opening of the Hisatsu railway line in 1908 and the completion of the Arase Dam and Route 219. These constructions brought changes and endings not only to cultural aspects but also to the ecosystem: there was a decrease in fish that migrate between sea and river and in fish that are only observed in clear water.

The rainy season doesn't end until the Kuma river releases the water.

The oldest flood recorded in the remaining documents in Sakamoto Town happened in 1539. People repeatedly raised the riverbank to control the flood after countless disasters. However, the flood in July 2020 was beyond our expectation – sweeping the riverside villages with water levels four to eight meters higher than predicted.

The saying in the heading was popular in the past during the rainy season. It is even said that a fisher in Amakusa island, located opposite the mouth of the Kuma river, could detect from the color of seawater how much the river water level would increase. The town was originally flooded at least once a year, especially the area called Shinkai. “Whenever the water rises, Shinkai is flooded” is a saying from “The History of Sakamoto Village.” Before the Arase Dam was constructed, the water level rose slowly even during heavy rain. People remember that damages caused by the flood were small, the people were used to flooding and prepared for it. Indeed, rising water level meant blessing rather than damage. I heard that no one used the word “disaster” to refer to the annual floods.

On the other hand, the history of Sakamoto is closely bonded up with the flood in history. Although the floods cause damages to around the Sakamoto area, heavy rain brought by the floods flow into the sea while embracing the fertile soil and this was how it became essential in the environment of the small sea enclosed by the Kyushu islands.

Mr. Motomura and Mr. Higashi took some photographs of flooding at various times and places, these photographs are significant historical documents used in the REBORN project.

Factory of the Nishi-Nippon Paper Industry and the Arase Dam

The first paper mill company in Kyushu was established in Sakamoto, utilizing the bountiful natural resources of the forest and the water of the Kuma River and its branches. In 1898, “Tohi Papermill Factory” was established in Sakamoto. The company changed name to “Karafuto Kogyo Co., Ltd.” in 1926, to “Jujo Papermill Co., Ltd.” in 1965, and to “Nishi-Nippon Paper Industry”

in 1967. The factory produced paper for almost a century, until its closure in 1988. The factory site became the The Kuma River Waiwai Park, but it is also used as a place to collect and separate rubbles after the flood as of January 2021. The residents are looking forward to families and children returning to the park.

Another facility built to utilize the water resources of the river was the Arase Dam and the Fujimoto hydro-electric power plant. The power plant generated electricity to cover the increasing demand after WWII, as a part of the comprehensive development plan of the Kuma River area. Around 1966, residents and fishers started to demand that the dam be removed for better mitigation of flood damages and environmental improvement. They ended up with the first construction work in Japan to remove a dam, which was completed in 2018 after a very long negotiation. The water quality improved and animals are coming back to the river little by little now that the dam is gone. The influence of the dam removal seems to spread along the river to the sea.

Many photographers have taken photographs of the area, even at the time a camera was too expensive to own for ordinary people, the economy flourished because of the papermill factory upheld by forestry and because of the dam construction. Circles for cultural activities were organized among the factory employees, and these greatly increased the number of people in the area who owned a camera.

In this project, two photographers are chosen. Giichiro Higashi, who lived in Yatsushiro City, took pictures of a broad area from Yatsushiro to Hitoyoshi and is remembered with his bike by people in Sakamoto. The other photographer is Takao Motomura, whose grandfather was a barber in Hagi village. Motomura became a reserve police officer after WWII, then entered a barber school. He moved to Kita-Kyushu City to open his barbershop, where he lives today. His photographs from that time were printed in a darkroom in his home in Hagi.

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Ten Years, and Hope Going Forward

Junpei Mizoguchi

Reborn River guide



I moved to Sakamoto because I love a rich river. It feels like yesterday, but it has already been ten years. The reason I choose Sakamoto was the people who maintained a strong bond to the river, and who sought to bring back the richness of the environment by removing the dam. I was interested in how their whole life co-existed with and was sustained by the Kuma River.

Despite my plan to be a fisher, I first became a river guide after moving here – the amount of fish in the river and my potential skill did not seem enough to sustain my family. After I tried various jobs, my empty schedule was filled by forestry in the winters. I imagined, and sort of experienced, the history of Sakamoto, by taking photographs of the landscape transforming with the river, and by digging up old memories and documents to collect. It was delightful to discover that my work experiences in the river and the forest provided me with understanding of what was written in the documents, helping me to imagine going through the history. The decade of collecting memories in Sakamoto was truly fruitful, supported by many people in Sakamoto and the Kuma river basin.

While I somehow managed to live here, I collected documents related to local history and photographs of the town whenever I could find any. My idea was to create a shared collection of the richness of the river. With time we will further take back the richness of the river. It made me desperate to think that even for my generation it is so difficult to experience how people enjoyed the rich environment of only two generations ago, and to think that for our children and grandchildren this will be even more difficult. Besides, I was simply attracted to the lost richness of the Kuma

River depicted in documents, photographs, and people's stories and to the possibility of regaining this richness.

When the water level of the river rose, people in Sakamoto basically got excited. The blessings came before the damages. The riverbank was dominated by people catching the fish that were coming up to the shore of the almost-flooding river. There is a clear distinction between water rising and flood as a disaster. Everyone had fishing spots near their house, to use only when the river level rose. Observation of the water level of the river was essential to their life, both during the day and at night. Every family had large fishing nets, mitten crab traps, and fishing poles. This is the land where, until just a few generations ago, it was as normal to have a boat as it is for us today to have a car, and knowing how to row and use poles was as normal as riding bicycles is for us today. At the same time, this is the land where countless floods hit, including disasters in 1915 and 1932. People overcame the disasters by flood-control measures and by moving their houses up to higher places, again and again. The river has been a constant part of their life. However, they do keep choosing to live here with the river.

People going out to gaze at the river in the early summer; people occupied by the river during the summer; fishers chasing sweetfish while the fragrant, orange-colored olive is blooming. Such sceneries both people and river existing together could not be seen in most rivers, but only in written materials preserving the memories.

However, this was not the case in Sakamoto.

People considered their wish to do fishing again in the shallow which had been sunk in the dam. Many felt the same way, and shared their passion in wanting to reconstruct the relationship between the river and people.

Supported by such people I established a company four years ago, aimed to increase awareness that the richness of the river could be recovered. I guided people on a rafting boat for a two-hour tour. I wanted to organize my team to share the idea of the richness, to bring it back by exposing them to history, culture, livelihoods, and richness within the activities. I wanted to make people take action against the issues and problems of losing the richness. I think I was just desperate. What made me keep going through these four years was the hope I saw in people, as they were transforming from guests to fans, then to members of our team, sharing a dream. The documents and records I stored in my house were important assets of Sakamoto, handed to me by people who supported "my initiative," and were utilized for tourism and as guiding materials.

At midnight on July 3rd, I went out to check the river's current speed, this was one of my side jobs. The task required me to leave my family when the risk of flooding was high. I was surprised by the unbelievably quick speed of the water coming from upstream, and immediately called my family in my home to tell them to evacuate. However, it was too late: my family missed the timeslot for a safe evacuation, and they had no choice but to stay on the upper floor of the building, to then later be rescued by a helicopter of the Self-Defense Force. The disaster was outside of what we had predicted,

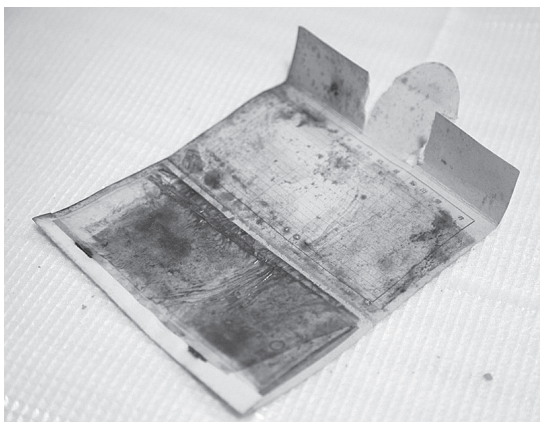
the water level easily passed four to nine meters higher than the historical records, and the level increased in a short time. Indeed, I was lucky that my family was not harmed. However, the Setoishi Base, my office in front of the Setoishi station, had vanished. The flood swept away the building with all the equipment for river guiding and all the documents I collected. Arase Base, a third-floor ferroconcrete building which was my home and office, was flooded up to the second-floor ceiling. About seventy percent of our household goods remained, but most of them were submerged by the water – including the precious photographs that the people had entrusted me with.

On July 5th, the next day of the disaster, I had the opportunity to observe the flood-stricken area from a private rescue helicopter as I guided the pilot. I lost words and despaired. Then, I considered what I could do. A few days later, I suddenly reached the conclusion that I could keep going as I did for those ten years. The idea was surprisingly relieving. The disaster took me to a position behind where I started, but it did not change the direction I was heading toward: reconstructing the relationship between people and nature. I just continued to seek a better way of co-existing, with fishery and forestry.

This book, filled by the photographs I once thought that I had lost, is a symbol. The book may bring something to the sufferers of floods, depressed by what they have lost but still stepping forward. I am grateful to believe this. I sincerely appreciate this hope-bearing recovery project, helped by so many people.

Report About Damaged Negative Films Treatment

The REBORN project was implemented by the Ametsuchi Volunteer Group, which consists of photographers, creators, and curators in Kumamoto. It was organized by Yuuki Toyoda, a photographer, in order to rescue the submerged old negative films in Sakamoto Town in Yatsushiro City damaged by the heavy rain in July 2020. The project consists of two dimensions; cleaning, preserving, and digitizing the negative films; and publication of a memorial book and exhibition of printed photographs.



1 . Cleaning, Preserving, and Digitizing the Damaged Film Negatives

Dealing with the volunteers' safety under the widespread threat of COVID-19 was a big concern in the cleaning activity. Although rapid treatment is significant when handling submerged films, there were concerns that the damaged films were possibly polluted with viruses, and the risk of infections would increase in the work environment shared by many workers. Therefore, we decided to prevent the infection by several measures: using a large space with ventilators; checking the body temperature of the volunteers; washing hands; disinfection; wearing gloves and masks; and setting a limit for the number of workers. The details of the activities explained below took place at Tsunagi Art Museum and Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto.

First, we sorted out the DP envelopes which were sticking to each other because of the moisture. Then the film negatives and prints in the envelopes were listed, allowing us to see the whole picture of the damages. The list contained a number, notes written on the envelopes, a picture of the item from the outside, and a comment on the item's condition. Judgment of the condition took place through discussion with curators experienced in treatment of water-damaged items. The items were

marked: ○ for most of the image remained, △ for part of the image remained, and × for most of the image lost. Then we removed water and dirt, opened the wet sleeves, and sandwiched them with alkaline papers to prevent curving and mold while drying.

We counted 114 6x6 films, 78 35mm negative films, 2 6x4.5 negative films, and 11 prints. The items found in a wooden container included 54 films where more than half the image remained, 28 films where part of the images remained, and 25 films that had lost most of their images. All the prints found in DP envelopes had lost most of their images. The films in another small box had no serious damages, except for four films on the top. The container seemed to have escaped the flood, although aging effects and moisture damages were observed on the films.

Although treatment for water-damaged materials is ideally completed within 48 hours, we spent three days. "What we could do" and "as much as possible" completely depended on volunteers, and there was no assurance that we would use the workplace for longer than three days under the concern of COVID-19. After the three-day treatment, film negatives and prints were digitized into a total of 2167 digital images.

2 . Exhibition of Prints and Publication of a Memorial Book

We plan to exhibit printed photographs and publish a memorial book, aiming to share the memories salvaged from the river. Fortunately, the project is funded by the Nippon Foundation and the Culture Promotion Foundation of Kumamoto Broadcasting Co., Ltd. to exhibit the negatives and prints at selected places in the Kumamoto prefecture. We also plan exhibitions in Sakamoto, to make opportunities for the residents who had to leave Sakamoto or who live in temporal housing because of the flood to visit the town again and to have conversations about the area. We publish this memorial book as a part of the project. This book will be distributed to residents in Sakamoto for free, and it will be sold to make donations to revitalize the town through the company called "Reborn."

The recovery project had limitations in human workforce, time, and financial resources, as the volunteer activities were organized by the private sector. Thus, sadly, we might have failed to treat some items which might have been possible to save. We will, however, utilize the knowledge and network obtained by this experience for future disasters that damage cultural items, especially photographs.

Afterword

First of all, our deep appreciations go to the families of Giichiro Higashi and Takao Motomura that generously permitted us to use their photographs and supported the project.

Second, we apologize that some of the portraits used in this book are published without the consent of the individuals portrayed. Despite our effort to reveal their identities to ask for their permission, it was difficult to determine all of them because many of the photographs were taken more than fifty years ago. We ended up with some individuals which we could contact and obtain their kind permission. Therefore, we would appreciate it if you could contact us when you find someone you know among the images. We would like to bring their pictures and this book to them.

At the moment, we have completed cleaning and digitizing the films, which are now settled in new containers for preservation. We will focus on research about the scenes, the sites, the people, and the events captured on the films, and hope to have the exhibition in Sakamoto Town as well as the other places.

We launched this project for the flood recovery, and now we are motivated to expand it; to not only cover flood recovery, but also to document people's life and their culture involving the Kuma River, both in the past and present, through collecting stories and taking photographs.

The activities of the project, including saving the films and publishing this book, are funded by the Nippon Foundation and the Culture Promotion Foundation of Kumamoto Broadcasting Co., Ltd. This book will be distributed to the residents of Sakamoto for free, and it will be sold at bookstores. The profit from the book sales will be donated to the revitalization of the area (except for necessary expenses for the project), managed by Junpei Mizoguchi, a river guide of Reborn who has been serving for the stricken area since right after the disaster.

Final Notes

I visited Sakamoto on July 23 2020, for the first time after the heavy rain. Before the flood, I sometimes passed by there to enjoy the view of the numerous villages along the river, the mountains, and the area's flow of slow-moving time. I lost words seeing the drastic changes that happened in the night of July 4th – in my favorite places submerged furniture, cars, and piling mud resurfaced beside Route 219, without neither people nor bridges.

When I visited my acquaintance Mr. Mizoguchi at his Reborn Arase base, I saw that even the second floor was wet, and mud was piled in the building. Then I received the photographs used in this book, hoping to rescue them with my skills as a photographer. Mr. Higashi's negatives were wet and muddy in a wooden box, and Mr. Motomura's negatives had fortunately escaped serious flooding and had just been exposed to humidity in an airtight container.

I went back to my home to look through them. I found that some films were dressed in mud and melted emulsion, as the water had come all the way into the film envelopes, and they were smelly. It seemed too much for me alone to deal with in terms of skills and time. Therefore, I made a post on social media the next day to ask for volunteers, which gathered more people I had expected to help with the treatment. I deeply appreciate those who offered a workshop and the experts who offered knowledge, not to mention all the volunteers listed at the end of the book.

It has been half a year since then, when I am writing this. I visit Sakamoto and talk to the local people more frequently than before. Then, I have the opportunity to meet people who

work to recover places and events for the former residents to return to the town, and I meet younger generations who actively work for Sakamoto Town. I feel I should focus on and learn from the flow of time shared by the people and the river, which must make people's minds pure. The series of photographs were gradually revealed through the treatment: simple portraits, fishers in the Kuma River, floating wooden boats, and the nostalgic scenes which we had lost for a long time. Time flew during the complicated treatment of the films, and I enjoyed looking at the photographs. Gradually, I started to seek a way to utilize the photographs – not just keeping them in a box, but a way to help Mr. Mizoguchi, to share the images, and to connect people and activities. Then, I came up with the idea of publishing this book.

It is difficult for us who are living today to notice all the possibilities captured by the photographs. People's motivations to take pictures varied greatly, reflecting personal intentions and emotions at that moment. However, while most photographs are left sleeping the moment they are taken, these photographs are still breathing after decades – they become memories of the places, leaving the photographers' hand and their personal intentions behind. The flood deprived us of countless things in our daily life, and it damaged the photographs we found. However, because of the flood, we gained an opportunity to recognize the importance of the photographs as collection of local memories and historical records. Last, but not least, I hope we can take small steps together, thinking about where we are heading and what we can do until the peaceful daily life will return to the flood-stricken Sakamoto Town and its surrounding area.

Yuuki Toyoda
1 February 2020