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2019 Impressive environment-related events in Japan

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Looking back on the year 2019, a few happy events came up to my mind - the imperial succession was conducted peacefully, various sports events including the Rugby World Cup encouraged us a lot, etc. At the same time, however, we encountered quite a lot of terrible disasters both in environmental and political spheres. Now I would like to review the past year and recall a few impressive events for me.

1. Watch out for climate disasters and ecosystem crises!

This September and October saw three powerful typhoons attacking eastern Japan causing terrible damages after strong winds and heavy rainfalls. The Typhoon No. 15 (Faxai) in September swept across Chiba Prefecture blowing down trees and utility poles, etc. having some 150 people injured in the Kanto Area. In October, the Typhoon No. 19 (Hagibis) flooded 25,000 hectares of land in eastern and northern Japan, killing more than 90 people, and leaving a record landslide disaster caused by one typhoon. The Typhoon No. 21 (Bualoi) did not hit the Japanese archipelago, but frontal instability brought about torrential rain in eastern Japan claiming precious human lives. Of course, the economic loss caused by these climate disasters were enormous.

Besides disastrous typhoons, northern Japan experienced unbelievably high temperatures this summer. On 26 May, Saroma-cho of Hokkaido witnessed record heat of 39.5 degrees C. On the next day, a total of 23 spots all across Japan including Obihiro of Hokkaido marked an "extremely hot day" of over 35 degrees C, which is quite unusual for the temperature in May. Later, on 15 August, 40.6 degrees C was observed in Nagaoka City in Niigata Pref. and 40.4 degrees C in Tsuruoka in Yamagata Pref., both located northern part of Japan.

The extreme climate events are not limited to the Japanese Archipelago. In January 2019, the City of Chicago marked -26.5 degrees C, and -48 degrees C in Minnesota, which was a lower temperature than that of the Antarctic! Just around the same time, a record heatwave of 46.6 degrees C was observed in Adelaide in Australia. Heatwaves attacked Europe in June and July, marking record high temperatures of over 40 degrees C in France, Germany, Holand, etc. On the other hand, Venetia, in November, was swamped by high tide induced by warming temperature. There, the water level rose by 187 cm and 85% of the city went under the water!

As regards ecosystems, IPBES reported in May the unprecedented decline of natural species. According to the report, an alarming level of species distinction was

observed all over the world. One million species are on the verge of extinction, many of which could be extinct in a few decades. The extinction of species was caused by significant alteration of land area and marine environment as the result of human actions. The report says that “Three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions” and “85% of wetlands present in 1700 had been lost by 2000” . These figures harshly remind us of how guilty we human beings are!

2. Greta Thunberg Effect

I have been paying attention to Greta’s activities since January this year. At the UN Climate Action Summit on 23 September, Greta, known for her straightforward speaking manner, spoke strongly to government leaders, “People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

What I admire about Greta is that she chose a zero-emission sailboat to travel from Europe to New York and then America to Spain to attend COP25. Her action made people in Europe feel ashamed of traveling by air, and by now many prefer to take trains. Greta demonstrated through her sailboat trip across the rough sea a possibility of a zero-emission move from one place to another, which is worthy of attention.

3. Japan taking no action

Why Japan cannot become serious about climate issues? Despite the repeated warning of scientists, and even in the face of such frequent climate disasters as we experienced in the past few years, the government of Japan will not take any substantial action to tackle climate risks. Why? A possible reason that came up to my mind is too much enthusiasm for economies. Prime Minister Abe, coming back in power in 2012, strongly promoted “Abenomics” as the only option to revitalize the long sluggish economy of this country. Even today, he still says that the economy is the top priority of the Abe administration. Of course, the economy is important, but it should not be just a temporary policy that benefits only those wealthy people. Rather it should be something to shape the future of the lives of our children and grandchildren living in the age of a catastrophic environment.

Regret to say that citizens of this country have not shown strong support to those policymakers who are addressing climate issues head-on. Poverty and unstable employment might have deprived people of their willingness to seriously consider climate risks. However, if we continue to use fossil fuels just for maintaining current economic benefits, we cannot avoid catastrophe. I am now worrying that we will see a catastrophic consequence shortly.

