

# Former JET returns to Tohoku

Ms Sharon van Etten was one of several former Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme participants who applied to revisit their host institutions under a Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs scheme. The aim of the initiative is to encourage local people in areas affected by the 11 March earthquake and tsunami and to inform people overseas of the current situation in Japan.



Sharon van Etten with students in Miyako

Sharon worked as a Coordinator of International relations for Iwate Prefecture from 2001 to 2004. She visited Iwate at the end of August this year. She kindly spoke with *Japan Reports* about her experiences.

**Japan Reports** *I understand you went via Tokyo. Did you notice any differences arriving in Japan compared to other trips?*

**Sharon van Etten** Yes, it did seem noticeably quieter, almost sombre, I would say. It was a Sunday, it was a weekend in Tokyo, so I don't know if that had something to do with it, but it did certainly feel a lot quieter. A lot of the lights had been switched off in office buildings, restaurants and things like that, so it was a lot darker than it had been.

**JR** *Transportation was back up and running?*

**SvE** I found no problems at all with transport. But certainly a bit of a darker, sombre mood.

At the same time, there was also a very

**JR** *Before arriving in Iwate, how did you feel about what you might see there after the earthquake and tsunami disaster?*

**SvE** I had obviously been in contact with all my friends and people that I know over there since the earthquake and tsunami, and luckily everyone I know was okay. So I guess I was already reassured from having spoken to them and they had told me in the inland areas there wasn't too much of an obvious affect now. They said that basically life was back to normal, but the coast was obviously very different.

They warned me that I would be quite shocked that some towns that I expected to see would look very different, or in the case of Taro for example, that it would no longer be there, which was true. So, I was expecting to see I guess a lot of

preservation conference, for example. I hadn't lived there but I did know what [Taro and Miyako] were like. So when I did go back for the first time since the disaster, particularly to Taro, it was a bit of a shock.

I was also positively surprised by how much had been cleaned up. I had thought that would still be more debris or garbage around. I had had friends who had been JETs in Iwate that had gone back to volunteer in those five months since the disaster and they were still very involved in construction and removing waste, so I had presumed that there would still be more rubble around.

In Miyako, on the main street which had the wave go up it, many houses are already being rebuilt. Businesses are being reopened.



The coast off Taro has long impressed with fantastic rock formations such as Sannojiwa [left]. The rocks still stand but the fishing town of Taro, part of Miyako City, sustained major damage and losses due to the massive tsunami [right]. Ten metre high tsunami walls were breached, washing away many houses previously thought safe.

obvious sense of *Gambaro\* Japan, Gambaro Tohoku*. Just as an example, even [at] the 7 Eleven in Akasaka [in Tokyo] all of the employees had little *Gambaro Tohoku* badges on. And I noticed some taxis driving around with *Gambaro Tohoku* stickers on the boot, so there was very much the sense that even in Tokyo people were thinking of Tohoku.

\* *Gambaro*: 'Let's hang in there together.'

differences, and I did. I was shocked when I went to the coast in Iwate and saw the extent of the damage.

Even though I lived in Morioka which was inland, I was an Iwate-ken CIR, so I actually did quite a lot of work for the other cities around the prefecture [which] didn't have enough international work to have a fulltime CIR. I would go to Miyako to translate at the international blue fin tuna

**JR** *Changing the topic a little, you also went to Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture which had just been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site. How was that?*

**SvE** That was great. Having lived in Iwate for three years, [I] had been to Hiraizumi many times. Obviously on my own trips, because it's a fantastic place, but also if we had visitors to the prefecture, it was one of the areas we would show. I would

Continued on page 4