BACK ON TRACK

The Sanriku Railway, damaged in 317 locations in the 2011 disaster, is fully operational again

Despite suffering massive damage in the 2011 disaster, the Sanriku Railway Company swiftly restored its services and has become a pillar of support for survivors. The railway symbolizes the route from ruin to recovery, and is proactively pursuing a range of initiatives to boost both ridership and disaster awareness.

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THE tsunami the Great East Japan Earthquake caused in March 2011 inflicted immense damage on the Sanriku Railway, a vital rail network that runs along the Sanriku Coast in Iwate Prefecture. The rail company restored service in surprisingly rapid fashion, however, and became an inspiring symbol for the catastrophe's survivors. Five years after the calamity, Sanriku Railway Co. President Masahiko Mochizuki outlined the railway's anticipated track to the future, as well as its role in conveying the dangers of natural disasters and what countermeasures should be taken.

Of the railway's 107.6 kilometers of track—forming the North Rias and South Rias lines—the earthquake damaged 317 locations, destroying or sweeping away sections of rail tunnels, station buildings and bridges. Alhough the entire network was forced to suspend operations immediately after the quake, inspections and rebuilding began promptly, and despite breaks in sections of the line, service resumed where possible five days later; by the end of the month a 36.2-kilometer section was operating again. In November 2011, the Japanese government sent 10.8 billion yen in aid to mend the other sections that had suffered immense damage. Within three years—on April 6, 2014—the entire Sanriku network had been restored to full service.

"The main reason restoration went so quickly was that we set up a reconstruction plan in the month following the disaster, and every sector involved in the process worked with one another," Mochizuki recalls. "The Sanriku Railway is a valuable resource in this region, since high school students with no other option for commuting must use it to get to school. We all worked quickly to be ready for the annual high school enrollment ceremonies in April." The company that originally constructed the railway referred to its original blueprints, and by incorporating the latest technology, all involved parties ensured that they swiftly built a superior railway at a lower cost for the younger residents. The results showed in the numbers: reconstruction costs totaled 9.1 billion yen—a billion less than the 10.8 billion yen estimate.

The Sanriku Railway restoration benefitted from

This photo, taken a month after the quake on April 11, shows the devastation of Sanriku's Shimanokoshi Station

Train cars purchased with a Kuwaiti government donation bear a thank-you message to Kuwait for its support

Serving drinks and snacks in the tatami mat car, popularized in a TV drama

On the platform: Sanriku Railway President Masahiko Mochizuki

overseas backing as well. The Kuwaiti government donated approximately 40 billion yen (equivalent to five million barrels of crude oil) to Japan to help in the reconstruction efforts, of which 9 billion yen was distributed to Iwate Prefecture. As the largest Sanriku Railway shareholder, Iwate Prefecture ensured that part of those funds was applied to the purchase of eight train cars and tasks such as the repair of station buildings.

"We inscribed a message on the new train cars written in Japanese, Arabic and English," Mochizuki reports. "It says, 'We thank Kuwait for their support.' And we display the Kuwaiti national emblem on the front of the new cars as a symbol of how support from people around the world made this restoration possible."

The "tatami mat train car," a converted car popularized in a Japanese TV drama, was one unique idea implemented. The new cars the money from Kuwait helped to purchase will replace carriages set for retirement this March.

The Sanriku Railway also has an ongoing program called the "Disaster Education Train" that provides knowledge about the disaster. Railway staff work as guides on a reserved train car to present lessons on the circumstances of an earthquake or other disaster. Popular for student field trips, the program is also offered in English.

"Compared to before the disaster, we are seeing more foreign tourists, so we intend to increase English-language signage along the railroad lines and at train stations," Mochizuki states. "We also have our Railway Girl and Railway Boy characters, and sales of character goods and tickets for specialized trains featuring them are doing well. The railway was known mostly for providing school transportation, but the disaster cut usage by high school students in half. With little prospect of growing the resident population in this era, we decided, why not develop nonresident ridership? So we put our efforts into welcoming foreign tourists and developing character-related businesses."

Proceeding full throttle on these new endeavors, the Sanriku Railway continues to roll on steadily, a proud symbol of the region's ongoing reconstruction efforts.