

On the pulse of the earth

"On the pulse of the earth" - This is the title of the photo that shows us the effects of natural disasters. A ship stranded like a foreign body on all the debris. A moment of incredible power that changed an entire country, the entire world. Here the earth has shown us once again how powerful it is and how powerless we humans are.

This photo shows the devastating consequences of 11 March 2011. At 14:46 local time, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred, triggered by the collision of several earth plates under the ocean floor. The seabed suddenly rises and falls. At the sea surface, this creates wave crests and troughs that spread out in all directions. At sea, this wave is almost invisible because it is still quite shallow here. Only in shallower water does it accumulate and can grow into a wave several 10 metres high. This is called a tsunami, which hit the Tohoku coast of Japan that day. Two 14-metre-high tidal waves swept everything away, leaving behind a single mountain of debris. The most dramatic aspect of this event, however, was that the tidal waves also hit the "Fukushima One" nuclear power plant, where a core meltdown, or GAU, occurred due to failed cooling systems. In a meltdown, the fuel rods become so hot that they are no longer in solid form. The molten core can penetrate the walls of the reactor and the pressure vessel can burst. This releases radioactive radiation. In Fukushima, several hydrogen explosions released radioactive substances into the water, soil, and air. A catastrophe for humans, animals, and plants. However, this disaster did not only affect the area around the nuclear power plant, but the radioactive material also spread regionally and globally in the oceans and on the earth's surface through the weather in the form of precipitation or wind.

This tsunami not only had serious consequences for the environment, but also for the population. There were thousands of dead and more than 70,000 homeless. In addition, the area around the nuclear power plant is contaminated. These figures once again illustrate the extreme impact of natural disasters.

According to a UN study, the number and intensity of natural disasters have been increasing since 1960. In 2021, 401 natural disasters occurred (Statista), claiming numerous lives and destroying entire regions. However, a distinction must be made between events caused by tectonics, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, or volcanic eruptions, and those caused by the climate. In the case of the latter, the number has increased significantly over the decades, while the other events have remained constant. The increasing emission of greenhouse gases leads to rising temperatures, which influence and intensify weather events and weather extremes. The tsunami in Fukushima is therefore a natural disaster with a tectonic cause, but the photo cannot be related to this event alone but represents the consequences of such disasters. It can be understood as an appeal not to avert one's gaze from such events. The distance between one's own home and the site of the disaster is often so great that people lose touch with it and reassure themselves that something like this cannot happen in their area. But that is precisely the problem. On the one hand, natural disasters can happen anywhere in the world, and on the other hand, it precisely takes this feeling of being affected for people to rethink and change their behaviour. Only when we become aware of the consequences of climate change can we understand why it is necessary to ensure that the earth does not continue to warm up. Especially those who are not so severely affected by natural disasters, such as people in Africa or Asia, need to be confronted with these consequences again and again to understand the seriousness of the situation.

Another aspect that also becomes clear is that man often feels he has power over the earth. He wantonly destroys nature and its creatures because he places himself above them. But these events like the tsunami in Japan make it clear to us humans again and again that we are powerless against the power of the earth. A tsunami destroys entire cities and people cannot stop it. It makes us vividly aware of our powerlessness and in the process shows us again and again how much we underestimate the planet on which we live.

"On the pulse of the earth" - This photo should make us aware that our planet is also "alive" and with such power that we humans are quite weak in comparison. Perhaps we should become aware of this more often to be able to see the essential again. And perhaps this realisation can also bring us closer together because humanity as such is still clearly more powerful than all the others. And so, it can at least reduce the number of natural disasters that can be traced back to climate change, but that will only work if people unite and use the opportunities gained through this.

The fragile paradise – Essays on issues of selected photographs

