

# Local Impacts of a Mega-disaster on Domestic and Foreign Travelers: The Case of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake\*

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## Abstract

We examine the short-term and long-term regional impacts of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake on the travel services industry in Japan. Using triple-differences designs, we find regionally heterogeneous and significantly negative impacts on inbound tourism, with negative effects lasting more than seven years post-disaster in Tohoku region prefectures. Although “East Japan” includes disaster-impacted prefectures in both the Tohoku and Kanto regions, the Tohoku region suffered more negative and longer-lasting impacts to its inbound visitors. Compared with domestic travelers, foreign travelers visited the Tohoku region 62.8 percent less in the 1st post-disaster year and over 50 percent less in each of the 2nd to 6th post-disaster years. The cumulative impact on inbound visitors over seven years post-disaster is  $-54.0$  percent for the Tohoku region, which includes three prefectures with the most physical damages (i.e., Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima) along with three prefectures with moderate (i.e., Aomori) or limited damages (i.e., Akita and Yamagata) due to the disaster. Early and continued references in foreign media to the “Tohoku Earthquake” seem to have had long-lasting and adverse impacts on Tohoku’s ability to attract foreign visitors.

**Key words:** Disaster impacts; Travel services trade; Tourism; Regional impacts

**JEL classification codes:** F14, F19, Q50 or Q54, R11, Z30

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