

Minamata's Fight for Justice: How Japan's Failed Debate and Response Sparked Local and Global Change Process Paper

When I learned about this year's theme, I knew that I wanted to explore an event related to environmental policy and justice due to my interests in these areas. Then, as I researched the 1960s-70s environmental movement, I discovered the events of Minamata disease. I thought that the victims' fight through tragic circumstances to hold corporations and the government accountable was inspiring and that it epitomized many aspects of the movement today. There was considerable debate between citizens, Chisso, and the prefectural and national governments over the cause of and solutions to the disease; as consequences, there was citizen action to achieve justice and diplomacy on the international stage. I was also intrigued by the topic's lack of coverage in Western media, despite its influence on the creation of UNEP, its similarities to Rachel Carson's "A Fable for Tomorrow," and other significant impacts highlighted by my project.

However, limited English coverage of the subject — along with stigmatization in the 1950s-60s that prevented widespread reporting even in Japan — presented research barriers. I began the process by perusing databases and news sites for broad information on the event's timeline, from its context and causes to the short- and long-term impacts. Afterward, I consulted scientific and historical academic papers on Minamata disease and collected information from several books, many of which contained first-hand accounts. I then turned my attention to photographs, oral histories, interviews, newspapers, and other historical documents. For answers to outstanding questions, I corresponded with experts at the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum through email. (Due to the language barrier and time difference, I was unable to call them or speak to eyewitnesses directly.)

While I have participated in NHD twice before, I had never competed in the website category. I believed that a website would help me showcase the powerful images I had found and provide me with enough flexibility to present my findings. To create my project, I first crafted my thesis, then outlined the website's sections. For each subsection, I wrote my claims, explanations, and analyses of important people and events using both primary and secondary sources; I then compiled my quotes, photographs, and other materials as evidence for each page. This streamlined my website creation process significantly, particularly after I overcame the software's learning curve. After the regional and state contests, I mainly refined my quotes and images, better incorporated the theme, and emphasized important details.

My argument is that because the government initially failed to condemn industrial interests due to debate after the disease's outbreak, citizens were forced to self-advocate through riots, lawsuits, negotiations, and other means to achieve justice. Ultimately, this prompted global diplomacy addressing

chemical pollution. Despite successes regarding compensation and pollution standards, failures are still found regarding those without reparations and other present-day tragedies. I hope that my project sheds light on these lesser-known injustices in environmental and public health history, particularly as we continue to face such challenges — even with methylmercury poisoning in the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Canada — today.