FGL Community Newsletter



Explore the Tohoku region through a new lens!

Learn about disaster recovery and tourism in nearby areas as well as the allure of AMB labs through the FGL newsletter Fall 2026 edition!

FGL COMMUNITY
TOHOKU UNIVERSITY



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Ask Senpai: Alisa Yoshida Belotti

Mamnun Murshed Anam

On this edition of Ask Senpai, I got the chance to sit down and chat with Alisa, a first-year Master student in the Aquaculture Biology Laboratory and an AMB alum!

Hailing from Boston, Massachusetts, and born to an American-Japanese couple, Alisa is "eel-ectric" about marine life and especially clams, lobsters and eels. From her journey into graduate school to her experiences in the lab, let's dive in and get to know her a little better!

Q. How has your journey from undergraduate studies to a Master's program been so far? Has it been smooth sailing, or have you encountered some unexpected currents?

As I decided to continue my research in the same laboratory where I had spent the last year and a half of my undergraduate studies, the transition was almost seamless. I was still surrounded by the same people and following much the same schedule. In fact, as I was unable to keep myself away from research over the summer, I hardly even realized that I had graduated!

However, I can't say that everything has been the same. The International Post-Graduate Program in Human Security, the program I am currently enrolled in, is an interdisciplinary course that bridges the fields of agriculture, medical, and environmental sciences. As a result, I have found that my coursework has extended beyond food systems and marine life to include topics such as virology, disaster response, and various social issues that I had not previously encountered in my undergraduate studies. Likewise, I have had the pleasure of meeting new people who have been studying different subjects and living different lives from mine.

Q. What inspired you to dive into your current research topic and join your laboratory? Has the experience been everything you expected, or have there been a few surprises beneath the surface?

I initially decided to join the Aquaculture Biology Laboratory due to a long-standing fascination with physiological systems, particularly reproductive systems, which I understood to be one of the laboratory's major research focuses. More broadly, I wanted to explore biology at the cellular level, rather than focusing exclusively on the individual organism or molecular mechanisms. I had also always been fascinated by our ability to manipulate living systems, such as through gene editing. My undergraduate research eventually led me to explore cell culture and exogenous gene expression, so I can say that I managed to fulfil much of that latter curiosity. Additionally, my research allowed me to interact with many molluscan species and to understand their behaviour and physiology, which was incredibly engaging as a lover of all things boneless and slimy.

However, a laboratory is about more than just its research. You inevitably spend a lot of time learning from and with the other students. Thus, I also chose this laboratory because I felt its

environment was exactly up my alley. I am already convinced that anyone who joins Tohoku University, or chooses to study marine biology in particular, is a little eccentric, but through laboratory visits and conversations with students, I felt that the people who gravitated to this lab were undoubtedly focused and driven; I thought that I would really enjoy my time here. To say that my experience has matched my expectations would be an understatement. I have learned so much from my senpai, discussed intellectually engaging topics, and caught and cooked meals together. I think this past year has been the most fun one yet.

Q. What has been the biggest challenge or most unexpected discovery during your first year as a Master student? How have you managed to stay afloat?

Although I expected entering the Master's program to be a fresh start, I ended up carrying over the rather demanding task, which I have had the utmost pleasure of undertaking, of developing my graduation thesis into a manuscript. With the help of my advisor, I spent much of the summer writing and revising the manuscript. However, this also meant that I found myself juggling closing my previous project, starting preliminary research for my Master's project, and figuring out which classes to take, all within the month of October. Not to mention the multiple presentations and reports I had to prepare for lab and coursework.

I think the biggest challenge has been learning how to balance these responsibilities. There is no doubt that I will be busier now than I was as an undergraduate, and learning to adjust to these increased responsibilities is necessary. I am somewhat of a perfectionist, but I have gradually learned to be more conscious of where I allocate my time and energy and, though it pains me to admit it, when it is time to call it quits. While this is something that will take time for me to reconcile with myself, I do think it is an important skill to develop.

Q. What pearls of wisdom would you share with your undergraduate *kouhais* who are considering pursuing a Master's degree? What should they prepare before diving into the deep sea of graduate research?

I think my biggest piece of advice would be to make the most of simply being present. A lot of the opportunities and experiences you get during university come from being involved in your laboratory and community, talking to people around you, and being willing to participate in things. I would also emphasize the importance of being proactive. Especially as an international student, I have found that you cannot always expect information or opportunities to come to you. Don't be afraid to ask questions or even be a little persistent (or annoying!). You have to make sure that you are aware of what is available to you and that you advocate for yourself.

Lastly, be friendly! Your teachers and peers are people too, and having good relationships with the people around you makes the experience all the more worthwhile. Things become much easier when you are a familiar face, and your time at university may become much more enjoyable.



Rebuilding for the Future: 15 Years of Resilience in Tohoku

Yuan Zihao (Charles)

Since I arrived in Sendai a year ago, I find the city remarkably peaceful and modern, but not overly so. It feels like a person showing their beauty, but not too much. Walking across the campuses, through the neighborhood where I live, and around tourist sites, it is easy to forget that this university, and the whole Tohoku region, once stood at the center of a devastating disaster.

One afternoon, the autumn wind and the plants' autumn colors suddenly reminded me of the unspoken grief of this place. I thought about how, 15 years ago, as a naïve boy, I could hardly understand what I saw in the television reports. But now, standing on the ground connected to the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear accident of March 11, 2011, my vision became completely blurred. Although many of the physical scars have been covered by newly rebuilt infrastructure, beneath them lies a deep story of resilience, involving both concrete reconstruction and human "soft recovery."

As a second-year international undergraduate student, I believe there is a unique perspective for me and my peers to look at this 15-year milestone. Today, we are living and standing within the recovery story itself.

To understand even small fragments of the story and the scale of the 2011 disaster, we must stand where the physical destruction took place. I believe one of the nearest places is Sendai Arahama Elementary School. The building is both a monument of survival and of tragedy, revealing the raw power of nature. Standing only several hundred meters from the ocean, where we can still hear the waves, we can see firsthand how the first and second floors were struck and flooded by the massive tsunami, leaving behind shattered concrete and even a deformed car inside the building. On that day, around 320 children, teachers, and Arahama residents evacuated to the rooftop and upper floors, remaining safe until they were rescued. However, standing on the rooftop and gazing at the surrounding area, I do not want to, but must, imagine how many people and how much of the community were completely swept away on that day.

Today, the Arahama neighborhood remains quiet. Because the coastline was designated as a high-risk zone, hundreds of former households had to resettle elsewhere. The school stands alone, like an old man passing down lessons of disaster preparedness to future generations.

Traveling further south into Futaba-machi, Fukushima Prefecture, the story is not just about a warning, but also about confronting a highly technical and long-term scientific challenge. The recovery story is deeply tied to the complex tasks of environmental remediation and the decommissioning of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors.

In fact, this mission is not limited to Futaba-machi alone but also involves many other towns and cities destroyed by the earthquake and the tsunami that followed. Places like Onagawa, where we AMB students frequently visit for fieldwork, experienced tsunami waves reaching around 15 meters, which swept away much of the town in a short time.

People are returning to their hometowns and trying to rebuild the places they were once familiar with. But whether in Futaba-machi or Onagawa, I can still see the unrecovered scars beneath the reconstruction. Even from the stories I read in The Japan Times article “15 Years After the Tohoku Quake, the Road Home Remains Uncertain for Many,” I learned that the feeling of a former home, or an ancestral home that now exists only as an empty lot, cannot be fully restored. In Futaba-machi, only part of the infrastructure has been rebuilt while many buildings still retain their appearance from 15 years ago, creating a ghostly and grieving atmosphere.



A building in Futaba-machi



Scenery of Onagawa

But on the other side of this story, people's united efforts and hope for recovery tell a brighter story. Fishing ports and agriculture are returning. Many people are working in fisheries along the coast every day, while coho salmon and mollusk aquaculture are striving to recover. We, as AMB students, also have a valuable chance to study the diverse ecology of this region.

Meanwhile, tourist sites such as Matsushima Bay, local products such as Fukushima peaches and sake from Daishichi Sake Brewery, located in the Fukushima castle town of Nihonmatsu, and transportation systems such as the Sanriku Railway are showing the signs of Tohoku's recovery to the world. Research institutes established or developed following the 2011 disaster, including the Institute for Disaster Reconstruction and Regeneration Research (IDRRR) and the International Research Institute of Disaster Science (IRIDeS), have also played important roles in helping rebuild the region.

Looking back on 15 years of recovery, the most important insight I take away is that the experience of the people of Tohoku's experiences, together with the efforts of researchers, continues to rebuild this region and make it better day by day, and traveling beyond the classroom gives us a real chance to face the aftermath of the disaster and observe how society has been rebuilding after such a catastrophe. Walking through the preserved classrooms of Arahama Elementary School or witnessing the technical challenges in Fukushima teaches me that true resilience is built through a combination of engineering, historical memory, and community willpower.

Blue Impulse in October: Day Trip to Matsushima Air Base

Abiyan Silalahi

When international students look for day trips around Miyagi in the autumn, the usual suggestions are hiking in Akiu, taking a boat tour around Matsushima Bay, or hunting for fall foliage up around Mount Zao. However, on Sunday, October 4th, I decided to check out something new and took an early morning train out to Higashimatsushima with my friends for the annual Matsushima Air Base Air Festival. Historically, this event usually takes place in late August, but this year organizers moved the 2026 festival to early October to avoid the intense summer heat.

I caught an early morning train on the JR Senseki Line from Sendai Station heading towards Ishinomaki. By 7:30 AM, the train cars were already filled with an interesting mix of people, including families with young kids wearing jet-patterned hats, aviation enthusiasts carrying massive camera bags, and a lot of locals. After about a fifty-minute ride, I got off at Yamoto Station. Yamoto is normally a quiet town, but on the festival day it became very crowded and lively. Entry to the base was completely free, which is always a welcome bonus on a student budget.

Matsushima Air Base holds a unique spot in Japanese aviation. It is the home base for the 21st Fighter Training Squadron, where pilots train on F-2 fighter jets, and it is also the permanent home base of Blue Impulse, the aerobatics team for the Japan Air Self-Defense Force.

Once inside, visitors could walk right up to static aircraft parked along the tarmac. They had dark ocean-blue F-2B fighter jets on display, along with F-15s brought in from other bases, T-4 trainer jets, and search-and-rescue helicopters. One of the highlights on the ground was a performance by a group called Blue Impulse Jr., a lighthearted display team run by the base maintenance staff. Instead of actual fighter jets, the crew rides heavily modified three-wheeled motor scooters outfitted with wings, nose cones, and fake smoke pipes. They performed a synchronized ground routine while playing funny audio commentary which got a lot of laughs from the crowd and showed the fun and casual side of base life.

Throughout the morning, different flight units took turns over the runway. Pairs of F-2B jets performed fast low passes and tight bank turns. The raw engine noise was incredible, and you could physically feel the vibration in your chest and entire body before the full sound even hit your ears. It was a new experience for me to have contact with a fighter jet this close. The rescue squadron also ran a demonstration, hovering a UH-60J helicopter in place while a technician winched down to pick up a simulated casualty from the field.

The main performance by Blue Impulse was in the afternoon. Matsushima is famous among air show fans because Blue Impulse actually flies twice in a single day. Six T-4 jets taxied out, completed their pre-flight ground checks, and took off together. Over the course of forty minutes, the pilots flew tight formations and used white smoke trails to sketch different designs on the sky such as massive stars and overlapping hearts across the autumn sky. Seeing six planes flying so close together at high speed was impressive, but watching the reactions from families and serious camera fans in the crowd was just as entertaining.

Aside from the aviation, the base felt like a huge Japanese street festival. Long rows of food tents lined the hangar areas, serving up hot yakisoba, Japanese fried chicken, frankfurters, grilled squid, and shaved ice. Official merchandise booths were packed with people buying embroidered patches, caps, and commemorative towels.

Taking a quick trip out to Yamoto for the air festival was a new, great and memorable experience. If you are thinking about checking out the Matsushima Air Base Air Festival in future seasons, here are four practical tips to keep in mind:

1. Charge your IC card at Sendai Station before you leave to avoid the ticket line at Yamoto Station.
2. Bring foam earplugs if you are sensitive to loud sounds.
3. Pack a foldable plastic ground sheet so you have somewhere clean and dry to sit down between flight routines as they don't have designated seat areas.
4. Wear a hat and bring sunglasses, because the open airfield offers virtually no shade throughout the day.

If you are looking for a fun, affordable weekend day trip with great festival food and something unique to see, it is definitely worth marking on your calendar for next year.



The Future Global Leadership Program: Our Past, Present, and Future

Koharu Miyoshi

On October 19th, the FGL Community held its final Welcome Party to welcome the C6 students, the last batch of FGL students to be admitted to Tohoku University. The attendance totaled to 7 professors and 49 students including alumni, including Ms. Sirinda Khurewattanakul, an alum from the first ever batch of FGL.

Tohoku University's Future Global Leadership Program first accepted students 15 years ago in 2011. Despite the Great East Japan Earthquake which occurred in March of that year, the program successfully kicked off and has since accepted approximately 380 students. As of 2026, we have 81 students enrolled from first to fourth year, and many more in their departments' graduate programs. Many FGL students have shown leadership befitting the program name, such as alum Trishit, who graduated with his PhD in 2024 and now helps run recovery efforts in Fukushima, as well as our current students Robert (C3) and Hanbin (C4) who are the presidents of TUFSA (Tohoku University Foreign Student Association) and TUSTEM (Tohoku University STEM Student Network) respectively. Other FGL students are also active in a wide range of extracurriculars from sports clubs to arts circles.



As the president of the FGL Community, I would like to thank all the students who attended the welcome party, from first years to current undergrads to graduate students and alumni. Additionally, I would like to thank the professors for their support, and my fellow FGL Community Leaders for their help with logistics. The FGL program is full of resourceful, resilient, funny, and kind people, and my hope is that more FGL students will find and befriend each other— for example, through FGL Community events— so that we can become a community that continues for years beyond graduation.

Starting in 2027, Tohoku University will be transitioning from FGL to the Gateway College program. Gateway College will be accepting its first Term I enrollees (mainly domestic students) from Spring 2027. The first Term II enrollees (mainly international students) will be admitted in Fall 2027.

Thank you for reading the Fall 2026 issue of the FGL Community Newsletter! See you next season!

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