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Group wants Fukushima plant preserved for Chernobyl-style tourism

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By YUTAKA SHIOKURA/ Staff Writer

Seven young intellectuals are seeking support for their proposal to preserve the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant as a tourist site carrying a cautionary message for future generations.

They believe Japan must decide soon what it wants the plant to look like 25 years from now, and they hope to stimulate discussion of that through magazine articles and Twitter exchanges based on their "tourism" suggestion.

"If we are to keep the memory alive, we should not tear the plant down," said Hiroki Azuma, a professor of philosophy at Waseda University. "The plant would serve us better as a tourist site that people from around the world can visit and where they can learn from history."

The group also includes sociologist Hiroshi Kainuma and architect Ryuji Fujimura. All are unusual in that they are younger than 50 years old and are trying to push a radical proposal.

They suggest, for example, that the plant considers bidding for UNESCO World Heritage status, something already held by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial as the site of the world's first atomic bombing.

Currently, the plant is in a state of cold shutdown. However, many areas remain largely off-limits because of heavy radioactive contamination. Twenty-five years from now, decommissioning and decontamination work should be fairly advanced.

The group notes that these days tourists from around the world are visiting the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine, where a reactor exploded in 1986.

But the group admits public reaction has been divided.

Some welcome the proposal as "interesting," while others condemn it as "unscrupulous" or "tasteless."

The members met in February in Tokyo to discuss the proposal in detail, such as what tourists should be encouraged to see at the plant and nearby.

One person involved stressed the need to secure a venue that shows conditions at the plant before the disaster struck and what life was like for residents of Fukushima Prefecture prior to the March 11, 2011, Great East Japan Earthquake that generated towering tsunami.

Another warned against using the word "resort," on the grounds that something so lighthearted would probably draw opposition.

In October, the group traveled to the region to canvas residents of the city of Minami-Soma. Part of the city lies within the mandatory exclusion zone.

It found that they, too, had mixed reactions to the proposal.

Some welcomed it. One resident called it "an idea we could not have come up with."

But others said the disaster remains too raw and immediate to talk about easily.

"They are still trying to bring the plant under control and to decontaminate it," protested one resident.

The group plans to continue its dialogue with people in affected areas.

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