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Journalist urges US students to learn from Minamata pollution cases - The Mainichi

3–4 minutes



Aileen Mioko Smith speaks at an event in Chicago on Oct. 18, 2023, with a photo from the 1970s of herself and photographer Eugene Smith displayed in back. (Kyodo)

CHICAGO (Kyodo) -- A photojournalist following the decades-old issue of mercury poisoning in Japan's Minamata on Wednesday called on students in the United States to stand up against environmental malfeasance, so as to prevent such debilitating and deadly effects on human health.

During an event at a university in Chicago, Aileen Mioko

Smith showed photos taken in the 1970s when she lived in the seaside city with Eugene Smith, her former husband and renowned photographer, and told the audience of the lessons she learned in the fight against pollution.

"Mercury poisoning is still very much an ongoing issue," said the 73-year-old resident of Kyoto. The couple's activities were portrayed in the film "Minamata," released in 2021 in Japan, in which actor Johnny Depp played Eugene, who died in 1978.

This month marked the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Minamata Convention on Mercury, a U.N. treaty meant to limit environmental pollution with mercury and mercury compounds.

But mercury pollution is still increasing around the world due to small-scale gold mining and the coal industry, she said, adding that a "paradigm shift is needed for change to happen" toward preventing further environmental pollution.

Minamata disease, or methylmercury poisoning, began sickening and killing residents of the city in the southwestern prefecture of Kumamoto in the 1950s.

Mercury in wastewater from a local chemical plant operated by Chisso Corp. was suspected of causing the sickness, but the company did not stop making acetaldehyde, the production of which had led to the pollution, until 12 years after the first case of the mysterious disease was officially

reported.

The period of negligence has led to at least 3,000 people being diagnosed with methylmercury poisoning, Smith said during the event at DePaul University, noting the figure is almost certainly too low.

Since her work in Minamata, Smith has expanded her activism to help raise awareness about deadly pollution, including from nuclear power. Smith said she was able to do this because "at age 22 it was shown to me that justice can prevail," referring to a Japanese court decision in 1973 that held Chisso liable for poisoning the residents of Minamata.

After listening to her presentation, Beula Ben, a 19-year-old student majoring in health sciences, said she thought that "the responsibility is on our generation to take care of things and not leave it to the next generation to fix."

The Japanese government recognized that Minamata disease was caused by industrial pollution in 1968.

In 1971, Aileen and Eugene moved to Minamata to document the health crisis. Their 1975 book brought the story of Minamata to international audiences, showing the world through pictures how "negligence, ignorance and greed" sickened and killed residents of the Japanese city.