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### After Disaster Hit Japan, Electric Cars Stepped Up



HELPING OUT An electric Mitsubishi i-MiEV in a tsunami-wrecked area of Iwate Prefecture

By KEN BELSON  
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#### TOKYO

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Three of 89 i-MiEVs at work in the Tohoku region of northeastern Japan

WITH deep-tread tires and ample ground clearance, a rugged 4-wheel-drive Hummer or Jeep might seem the best choice for navigating through the wrecked cities of northeastern Japan. The areas pummeled by the earthquake and tsunami in March would surely be inhospitable for an electric vehicle.

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Yet in the days and weeks after the horrific one-two punch of natural disasters, wispy battery-electric cars — engineered for lightness and equipped with tires designed for minimal rolling resistance — proved their mettle.

These welterweight sedans, including models from Mitsubishi and Nissan, turned out to be the vehicles that got through — not because of any special ability to claw their way over mountains of debris, but because they were able to “refuel” at common electrical outlets.

With oil refineries out of commission and clogged roadways slowing deliveries, finding gasoline had become a challenge. Shortages were so acute that Japan’s Self-Defense Forces had to truck in gasoline; donations of diesel fuel were accepted from China.

Yet in Sendai, about 250 miles northeast of Tokyo, and other cities ravaged by the earthquake, electricity returned within days. Taking stock of the situation, the president of Mitsubishi Motors, Osamu Masuko, offered dozens of his company’s egg-shaped i-MiEV (pronounced “eye-meev”) electric cars to affected cities.

Despite their image as light-duty runabouts best suited for trips to a nearby shopping mall, the electric vehicles were immediately put to use. They were pressed into service ferrying supplies to refugee centers, schools and hospitals, and taking doctors, city workers and volunteers on their rounds.

While the i-MiEVs could not help out with tasks like hauling building materials or towing stranded vehicles, the assistance from Mitsubishi was much appreciated. In all, 89 i-MiEVs went to the recovery effort, including 34 to Miyagi Prefecture, 33 to Fukushima Prefecture and 18 to Iwate Prefecture.

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