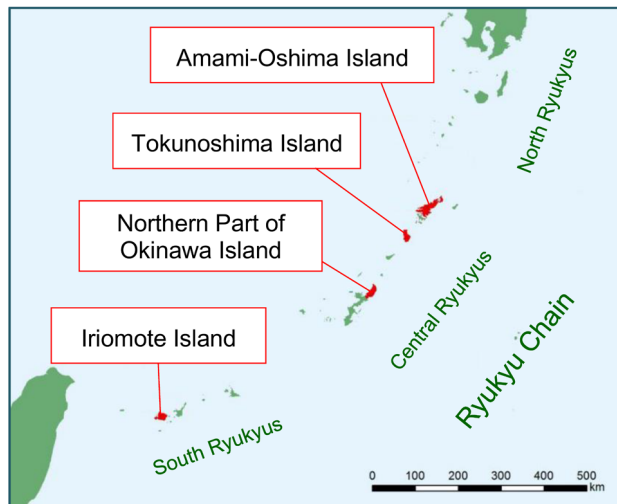


Hesitant Heritage: U.S. Bases on Okinawa and Japan's Flawed Bid for Yambaru Forest World Heritage Status

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2019 World Heritage Nomination

On February 1, 2019, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment submitted to UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) its nomination of four areas in the Ryukyu archipelago for UNESCO World Natural Heritage status. The areas are Amami-Oshima Island, Tokuno-Shima Island, the Northern Part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island (see [the Nomination Document](#) and [the Nomination Annexes](#)).



World Natural Heritage Nominated Areas

Source: [Ministry of the Environment](#)



Source: Ministry of the Environment

This is the Ministry's second attempt in the last two years.

In February 2017, the Ministry submitted its first nomination. However, in May 2018, IUCN, the advisory body to UNESCO concerning matters related to World Natural Heritage, recommended that the nomination be "deferred" requesting substantial revision. In

response, the Ministry withdrew the nomination.

In the present nomination dossier, we note improvements from the previous nomination, especially regarding issues pertaining to the U.S. military’s Northern Training Area (NTA), which is adjacent to the nominated area of the “Northern Part of Okinawa Island” (NPOI). NTA occupies 3,600 hectares of the NPOI, which is 7,700 ha in what Okinawans refer to as Yambaru forest.

The improvements reflect the efforts of local residents and civil society members to draw the attention of IUCN to the issues of the NTA. They attest to the integrity of the IUCN World Heritage Panel, which did not dodge the difficult political issues in its evaluation of the nomination. They also confirm the renewed determination of the Ministry of the Environment to have the areas inscribed as WNH sites (see [the Ministry's work on the Yambaru National Park](#)).

However, many challenges remain to be resolved before the IUCN can recommend to UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee that the nominated areas qualify for inscription as WNH sites.

Below, the necessary “improvements” are explained.

The First Nomination

In February 2017, the Ministry submitted to IUCN its nomination of the same four areas for WNH status as in its earlier nomination (see [the 2017 Nomination Document](#)).

The nomination dossier presented detailed descriptions of the ecological systems and biodiversity of the nominated areas. It made the argument that these areas all meet the requirements for WNH status in the criteria of

“ecosystems/communities and ecological/biological processes” and “biodiversity and threatened species.” Its presentation was similar to (and in many aspects improved on) those of the Ministry’s previously successful nominations of four other natural World Heritage sites in Japan.



Okinawa Woodpecker in Yambaru Forest

Source: Ministry of the Environment

However, the nomination failed to properly address one critical fact and issues surrounding it: it barely mentioned the presence of the U.S. military’s NTA in the Yambaru forest and ignored environmental concerns and problems presented by the NTA for the nomination.

In the 320 page nomination document, the following passage provided the fullest description of the NTA.

As of December 2016, US military bases within Okinawa Prefecture cover an area of 18,822 ha, 8% of the prefecture’s total area. US military installations in Kunigami Village and Higashi Village in the northern part of Okinawa Island containing the nominated property, occupy 1,446 ha (7% of village land) and 2,267 ha (28% of village land) respectively. Much of the area, 3,658 ha, is presently being used for Camp Gonsalves (also known as the Northern

Training Area and the Jungle Warfare Training Area) (p.94).

According to U.S. military documents, the NTA is described as a jungle warfare training ground for units with up to 1,000 personnel for periods of 30 days. It contains 21 landing zones for MV-22 Osprey and other helicopters and other training facilities. Osprey and helicopter landing and low altitude flight exercises take place along with artillery drills (though with no live firing) (see p.115, *U.S. Marines' Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan*).

The nomination dossier provided no information on the impact of low altitude flight training by military aircraft taking place in the NTA on the adjacent NPOI area. Nothing was mentioned concerning whether the U.S. military or government was collaborating with the Japanese government in the nomination and inscription processes. There was no inclusion or mention of US military documents pertaining to the environment of the NTA.

It even failed to mention that it was only in December 2016 that fifty-one percent of the NTA was returned to the Japanese government thereby reducing the area of the NTA from 7,800 ha to 3,650 ha, and that the land return was contingent on building six new landing zones or helipads within the remaining NTA in Kunigami and Higashi.

The Ministry of the Environment has repeatedly told NGOs that its "lack of jurisdiction over the NTA" prevented the ministry from discussing the NTA in the dossier.

Civil Society Addresses Issues of NTA

By the time the Ministry of the Environment submitted its first nomination in February 2017, civil society members and groups had already requested that the Ministry address the issues of the environmental consequences of military operations in the NTA, especially the construction of six helipads, and provide official corroboration from the U.S. government. We had also sent a letter to the U.S. military and the U.S. government, requesting that they collaborate with the Japanese government to preserve the natural bounty of the area.

We insisted that, given that NTA is adjacent to the nominated area, collaboration between the Japanese and the U.S. military and government is necessary to protect the area.

After reviewing the 2017 nomination dossier, we provided additional information to the IUCN World Heritage Panel. Our information included analysis by NGOs of the nomination dossier (see [the analysis](#)) and our letter to the U.S. government and U.S. military (see [the letter](#) published in *The Japan Times*). It also included a list of literature regarding the impact of the NTA on the environment, including six new landing zones or helipads, in



MV-22 Osprey Flight Training in Yambaru Forest

Photo by T. Kitaueda

the Yambaru forest.

It also included copies of excerpts of *U.S. Marines' Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan 2014*, which provide information on the environment of the NTA as well as on military training and conservation measures carried out by the U.S. military in the NTA. (NGOs questioned IUCN and the Ministry: specifically, we pointed out that since NGOs could get information on the NTA from the U.S. military, surely Japan's Ministry of the Environment could do the same.)

These efforts gained global attention and support.

In June 2017, at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Krakow, Poland, a U.S. NGO helped distribute to attendees copies of a briefing document Japanese NGOs had prepared regarding the NTA (see [the Briefing document](#)).

In December 2017, the City Council of Berkeley, California adopted a resolution endorsing the NGOs' request that the U.S. government and military collaborate with the Japanese government on the nomination and inscription of the NPOI as a WNH site (see [the Resolution](#)).

The Ministry's Supplementary Information and IUCN Recommendation

Apparently, responding in part to civil society members' requests and concerns sent to the IUCN, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment provided supplementary information to IUCN to advance the nomination process after its submission of the dossier. *IUCN World Heritage Evaluations 2018* revealed supplementary information including the following (see [IUCN Evaluation Document](#)):

1. "The Ministry of the Environment is

planning to include as much as possible the returned [areas of the] NTA in the Yambaru National Park and the nominated property, and is in a position to add areas to the property quickly" (p.43).

2. "For the time being, the remaining NTA remains under US control but acts as an important de facto buffer zone to the nominated property, contributing to landscape connectivity and also supporting important habitats for key species" (p.43).

3. "There is also a basic 'collaboration agreement' (memorandum of 7 December 2016) between the Government of Japan and the US Government on their cooperation for nature conservation - especially IAS [invasive alien species] control and species monitoring - in the remaining Northern Training Area which neighbors the nominated property on Okinawa" (p.43).

IUCN reviews eight World Heritage nominations for 2018

■ Tue, 23 Jan 2018

The IUCN World Heritage Panel recently gathered in Gland, Switzerland to review eight natural areas nominated for potential inscription on the World Heritage List in 2018. Among these sites, three are in Asia, two in Europe, while the remaining three are located in North America, South America and Africa. One is a proposed extension of an existing site and two are nominated as 'mixed' natural and cultural sites.



The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the official advisor on nature under the World Heritage Convention, and makes recommendations to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee on whether a natural site should be inscribed on the World Heritage List or not. The Committee will consider IUCN's advice and take final decisions during its annual session taking place from 24 June to 4 July 2018 in Bahrain.

IUCN World Heritage Panel. Original

Source: IUCN News

To the surprise of the Ministry of the Environment (but as anticipated by civil society members), however, in May 2018, IUCN recommended that the nomination by the Japanese Ministry of the Environment be “deferred” (see [the Ryukyu Shimpo](#)).

The returned and the remaining areas of the NTA next to the nominated area of NPOI remained as problems for IUCN. In its diplomatic language, IUCN provided the following evaluation:

"IUCN does not consider that the area(s) as nominated meets the integrity requirements." "On Okinawa, the nominated areas appear quite fragmented on the map, although there is a good degree of overall landscape and habitat connectivity, mostly through the intact forest in the returned [areas of] and remaining NTA, which are not currently included in the nominated area, nor buffer zones" (p.44).

IUCN recommended, among other things, that the Ministry "integrate the returned areas of the Northern Training Area on Okinawa Island into the nominated property, as appropriate, taking into consideration their contribution to the justification of criterion X [biodiversity], and further develop the necessary coordination mechanisms to integrate the remaining areas of the Northern Training Area into the overall planning and management of the nominated property" (p.48).

In response to the recommendations, in June 2018, the Ministry withdrew the nomination

(see [The Japan Times](#)). We suspected that the Ministry wanted to avoid by all means the possibility that the issues of the NTA and other issues in the nomination would be exposed at the World Heritage Committee Meeting in Manama Bahrain in the summer of 2018.

Revised Nomination: Improvements

On February 1, 2019, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment submitted its revised nomination with a sense of urgency (this could be the Ministry's last chance) (see [The Ryukyu Shimpo](#), see also [the Nomination Document](#) and [the Nomination Annexes](#)). The nomination now focuses solely on the criterion of biodiversity as recommended by the IUCN evaluation.



XXX of 2019 WNH Nomination Document

This time, the nomination dossier includes information (albeit limited) on the NTA, a discussion on the collaboration between the Japanese and U.S. governments with the text of the "Document Concerning Cooperation with the United State Government in the Northern Training Area" (the Japan-US Joint Committee) in the Nomination Annexes (pp.5-541), and excerpts of the *U.S. Marines' Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan 2014* also in the Annexes (pp. 5-489-5-540).

In other words, the Ministry of the Environment (and the U.S. government) incorporated into the nomination documents responses to civil society members demands.

The inclusion of such information, especially the cooperation agreement, in the new dossier is significant. The Japanese government is extremely reluctant to disclose information relating to the U.S. bases in Japan in any form. "Agreements" made in the secretive Japan-U.S. Joint Committee rarely become public as they "will not be released without mutual agreement." The Ministry of the Environment appears to have realized that successful inscription of the NPOI as a World Natural Heritage site requires the Ministry to go beyond bilateral conventional practices. In turn, the information included in these international convention-bound documents encourages and helps civil society members to evaluate whether the NPOI meets the criteria for a WNH site.

Challenges

Much work remains ahead of the Japanese Ministry of the Environment, civil society members and the U.S. military and government. The mere inclusion of information on the environment of the NTA, both returned and remaining areas, and the collaboration agreement in the new nomination dossier alone cannot resolve the actual problems.

Indeed, the information in the dossier itself suggests the need for further scrutiny. For example, the new nomination document claims that the Japanese government conducted surveys in the returned area of the NTA now included in the NPOI and confirmed that the areas surveyed are "free from soil pollution and water contamination" (p.128). However, no mention is made of the fact that many parts of the returned area are littered with bullet shells, unexploded ordinance, and other discarded military materials including toxic chemicals (see [The Ryukyu Shimpo](#)).

It is also hard at this point to gauge to what

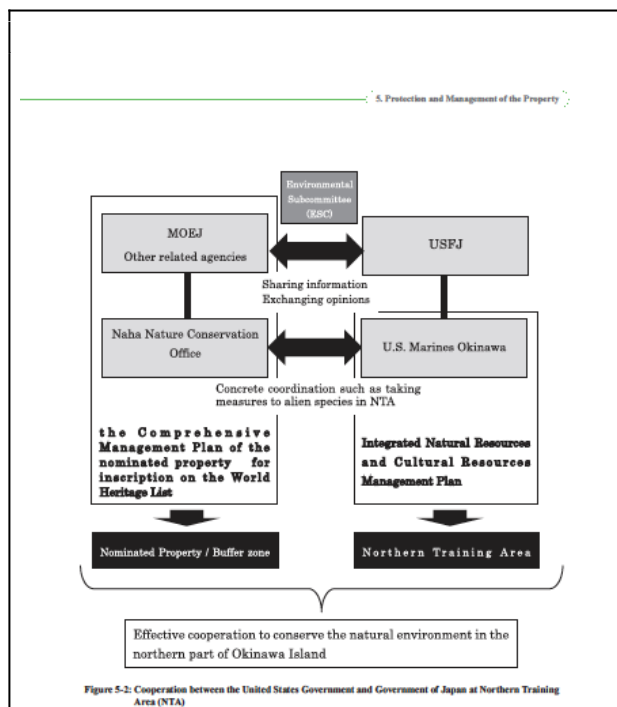


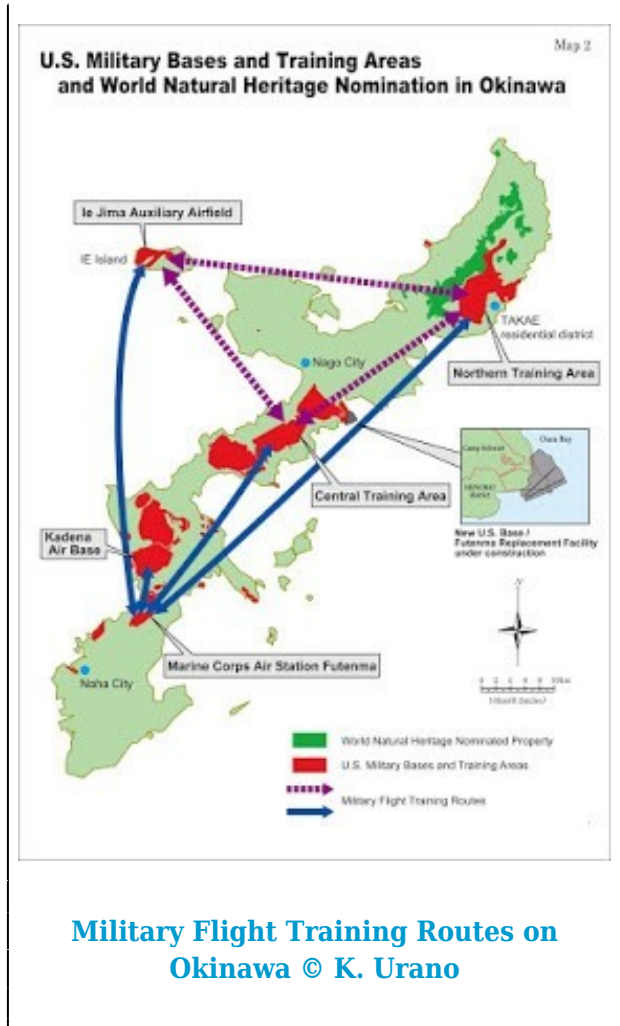
Figure 5-2: Cooperation between the United States Government and Government of Japan at Northern Training Area (NTA)

Cooperation Diagram

2019 WNH Nomination Document, p.243

extent the "collaboration agreement" is effective. There is evidence that the U.S. military's aircraft flight training in the NTA is intensifying, creating more "noise pollution" than before in the NTA. This is because while the area of NTA was reduced to half of the original size (the returned area is now part of the NPOI), "the same amount of training" is being carried out in the remaining NTA (see p.113 of *U.S. Marine's Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan 2014*).

It is also difficult not to notice that the nomination document makes no mention of how the construction of a new U.S. military airbase in Henoko-Oura Bay, just 10 miles away from the nominated area of NPOI, will affect the environment in the area. The IUCN evaluation stated "[IUCN] confirmed this development [the base construction] is distant from the nominated property" (p. 46), but this can not be taken as a legitimate excuse for not addressing the issue of the base construction in Henoko-Oura Bay. Clearly, should the base be constructed over the strong opposition of Okinawan citizens, expressed again in the recent referendum (see [The Japan Times](#)), many aircraft (more than 70 aircraft are expected to be stationed at the base) will take off, fly to the Yambaru forest, and carry out landing and low altitude flight exercises in and around the NTA before returning to the base. In fact, partial land reclamation work in Henoko-Oura Bay is already causing severe degradation to its environment, one of the most biodiversity-rich areas in the world (see [The Okinawa Prefectural Government](#)) as the Japanese government's mitigation measures have proven to be ineffective. This calls into question the Ministry of the Environment's ability to address environmental issues involving the U.S. military in Japan.



In short, the new nomination documents still avoid discussion of the impact of military training and facility development in the NTA on the NOPI. This is in sharp contrast to the fact that the U.S. military's own *Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan 2014* details training practices and facility development in the NTA as potential problems or threats to the environment of the Yambaru forest.

These issues need to be addressed and acceptable solutions need to be found or at least proposed in the next fifteen months before the IUCN make its final decision on the nomination.

To that end, all the parties involved would need to provide additional information on the

consequences of U.S. base construction and expanded military activity in and around Yambaru forest, building upon the improvements made in the nomination dossier.



Stream in Yambaru Forest Photo by H. Yoshikawa

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