

Research Article

Saving Katoku: A Case Study of the Conflicting Environmental and Economic Demands on Japan's Island Communities

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research from Amami Ōshima, southern Japan, this paper documents the ways in which contemporary societies, from the hamlet to the nation state, are wrestling with opposing forces of environmental and economic sustainability and discusses the fractures this creates for people and ecosystems. It uses as a case study the protest to stop the construction of a seawall being built in Katoku, an ocean hamlet in Amami, based within the buffer zone of the island's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Natural Heritage Site. Rather than being built with the primary aim to protect "people and property," I suggest this infrastructural intervention is a symbolic declaration of risk management and repository of huge economic value for the island and prefecture. The background to the paper is the return of a cache of color photographs taken by an American anthropologist in the 1950s and the 70th anniversary of the reversion of Amami in 1953 from US military to Japanese control. The paper considers the contemporary ramifications of policy instituted in the post-World War II period, that has sought to maximize the potential of "remote" areas and continues to favor growth and development at the expense of the health of multispecies island communities.

Keywords: Amami Ōshima; Seawall; Concrete; Photography; World War II

Introduction

In November 2023, community members filed into an auditorium in Naze, the largest town on the island of Amami Ōshima in southern Japan. With attendees including the island's mayor, the governor of Kagoshima Prefecture, and Japan's deputy environment minister, the event marked the 70th anniversary of the island's return to Japanese control, following the period of post-World War II occupation by the American Military between 1945 and 1953. Standing by the side of the road next to the auditorium's car park, a lone protestor holding a small placard reading "SAVE KATOKU" was trying to catch the attention of the event's guests and any media present. On high alert since the assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Shinto Abe in the summer of 2022, the government officials, flanked by security agents, avoided upset by using an alternative entrance.

Attending the event as a guest myself, this was the first occasion on which I had heard of the coastal hamlet of Katoku, a biodiversity hotspot in south Amami, or the protest movement to "SAVE" it (Fig. 1). After a number of strong typhoons in 2014, the tideline at Katoku came precariously

close to the village cemetery. Some concerned residents asked for help from the authorities to halt beach erosion, with a controversial plan to build a huge seawall subsequently proposed. Still unbuilt over ten years later, opponents to the seawall argue that its construction would pose a major threat to Katoku's unique and fragile ecosystem, the actual fabric of the beach and the habitability of the village itself. Amami has a global reputation as a natural paradise and was designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Natural Heritage Site in 2021. Yet since the 1960s, its beaches and rivers have been subject to the same concretization seen across the country—a result of Japan's addiction to public works and the considerable power of the construction industry. Katoku is a rare site that has remained free of concrete walls or piers. Its beach is also the mouth of the Katoku river, and, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), it is the last free-flowing river from source to ocean in Amami, perhaps in Japan.

The dispute over the site and its presence in the background of the 70th anniversary commemorations brought into relief wider problems facing communities in Japan and globally. The need to build resilience to the social, economic, and environmental precarity that has stemmed from dominant post-war policies of growth has become its

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own driver of infrastructural intervention and social fractures. Despite its small size and distance from mainland Japan, Amami presents “a window onto complexity” (Candea 2007: 181) to explore the history of geopolitical conflict in the region and the dysfunction of Japan’s economic and environmental policy, which is entrenched in discourses of growth despite the risk development poses to the health of diverse, multispecies communities.

In this paper, I use the situation unfolding at Katoku to demonstrate the conflicts that emerge between the need to sustain both the economy and the environment in an ecologically sensitive area. I will first introduce the ethnographic methodology, which was based around the return of a cache of archival photographs to Amami, to demonstrate how visuals of the past can be drawn into contemporary issues. I will then consider in detail the case study of Katoku’s seawall, suggesting bureaucratic frameworks, resource extraction, and economic activity are being prioritized over the social and environmental health of the village. I articulate how discourse at the micro level of the hamlet and the interpersonal dynamics between residents have fractured to the extent that an impasse has been reached between groups for and against the seawall. Rather than focus on the actions of individual residents, my intent is to root out the overarching causes of the impasse by arguing that the resulting conflict is the outcome of dysfunctional post-war economic policy designed to bring economic development and “resilience” to rural areas and consequently to the nation. In the final section, I consider how the impasse at the local level has led to outside bodies making decisions regarding the fate of Katoku up to national legal levels. I suggest that the case study of Katoku provides an example of the ways in which contemporary societies at all levels, from the hamlet to the nation state, are wrestling with opposing forces of environmental and economic sustainability, and the social fractures this causes.

Methodology

I have carried out fieldwork in Amami since 2017, including twelve months of ethnographic research with the island’s textile craftspeople exploring the sustainability of local natural dyeing practices (Linton 2025). After a period away from the island, I returned to Amami in 2023, bringing with me a collection of color photographs of Amamian daily life taken in the early 1950s by the American anthropologist Douglas Haring. Haring carried out an ethnographic survey in Amami for six months between 1951–1952 and, alongside a report for the US Army, he made a number of films and around 1,000 color photographic slides including topics on landscape, agriculture, craft, transport, commerce, and festivals. No equivalent photographs exist of Amami from this time, making them a significant resource for the island. In early 2023, I made digital copies of 600 of these slides, which are held in Haring’s archive at the University of Syracuse, and alongside colleagues from Kagoshima University and research assistant Kazuko Miyashita, undertook a project to return them to the community. The project included interviews using photo

elicitation, site visits, talks, screenings, and exhibitions using Haring’s visuals to provide community access to the materials. The exhibition toured to thirteen locations—including town halls, libraries, and folk museums—across five islands in the Amami island group and to Kagoshima. On the opening day of the first exhibition in Naze, the main city in Amami, we ran a public symposium where residents were able to share their feedback. These exchanges in both public and private forums allowed me to explore how such photographs of Amami—taken prior to the rapid social, economic, and environmental changes experienced by the island’s residents in the period since the 1950s—are experienced today and the impact they have on individual and collective levels. Anthropologists have demonstrated the potential power of archives and their ability to influence contemporary debate (Kratz 2002; Peers and Brown 2009; Banks and Vokes 2010). Similarly, in Amami, for academics and the public alike, Haring’s images are considered special as they capture the island at a critical crossroads of post-war economic development and rapid modernization.

One of the most striking features of the Amamian landscape captured by Haring’s images is the seeming vulnerability of the ocean hamlets, with buildings constructed from wood and thatched with straw situated close to the beach with no coastal protection (Fig. 2). Amami is located in the Ryūkyū archipelago, the string of islands that stretch from mainland Japan to Taiwan. Multiple strong typhoons are an annual occurrence, and since the destruction and trauma of the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake (known as 3.11), tsunamis haunt the public imaginary. Haring’s photos allowed for a meaningful shift in perspective, with people telling us that while they took the seawalls for granted as having been built for their safety, seeing images of their villages without the walls made them think there were other forces at work. One resident told Kazuko and I that “the turning point was during the period of high growth” in Japan (roughly between the 1960s–1980s):

Garden walls around the house were built with hibiscus and shrub hedges, but by the time I was in primary school they were almost gone. The local government subsidized the replacement of the plant wall with a concrete block wall because the plant hedge was considered ugly for visitors from the mainland (Fig. 3). At that time, when I went to Tokyo and Osaka, they were very modernized, so I think that’s why the local government decided to do something similar. . . . The road is paved all the way back to the mountain, and billions were spent to build a port in each village, even though there was not even one ship (local resident, aged 65).

Many of Amami’s rivers are banked with concrete, while seawalls, quays, and tetrapods litter the coast (Figs. 4 and 5). In the main city of Naze we were told: “There used to be lots of beaches without concrete structures, but now only place names remain.” Even in the deep forest in Kinsakubaru National Park, an area included in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage listing, there are concrete water tunnels and embankments that have devastated the breeding grounds of the endangered Ryūkyū Ayu, a fish that requires small stones on riverbanks to lay their eggs. The scale of this problem only fully dawned on me when I visited Katoku and realized the

extent of what Amami has lost. Being a keen swimmer, as I drove through the village, I spotted a place in the river ideal for swimming; and on reaching the beach, where the river mouth meets the ocean, deep channels had been carved into the sand by the natural, everchanging course of water. As a UK citizen living between Scotland and England, Katoku did not appear overly unusual as such un-engineered beaches are common across the British Isles. But many of the Japanese people I interviewed familiar with Katoku told me they had never seen anything like this before. Despite the uniqueness of this meeting point of the river and sea, the site has become a place of intense protest, not welcoming for locals or visitors alike. While Katoku started out as a local environmental issue, it has quickly descended into a social conflict orchestrated at the national level.

The seawall issue

Amami can be split roughly into two halves. The north covers around a third of the land mass, is home to the airport and city of Naze, has accessible beaches and large supermarkets, and is the heart of touristic development. Because people moving from the mainland often want to live here, the population is rising, while in south Amami it is falling. While the scenery is striking, south Amami has high mountains and dense subtropical rainforest, meaning it can be dark and rains a lot. It is reminiscent of rural mainland Japan, where the population frequently consists of elderly residents, and the local authorities are battling depopulation (Klien 2020; Traphagan 2020). Katoku is located around an hour's drive south from Naze and within the buffer zone of the World Natural Heritage Site. To reach the village, one must branch off the main highway and pass through deep mountains on poorly maintained roads before dropping steeply down to the coast. The village has around fourteen houses with neat vegetable gardens and a density of butterflies I had not seen anywhere else in Amami. With only seventeen residents and no children, it is remarkably quiet, aside from the comings and goings of surfers who come here to catch the waves of the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 6). While the community in Katoku is small, the challenges it faces and the impacts of the protest movement around it have larger repercussions beyond this one community.

Set back from the island's main coastline, Katoku has a "pocket beach," which oceanographer Ed Atkins explains "are often treated as closed systems, with sediment transport largely limited to beach rotation where sand moves back and forth across the bay under different wave conditions" (2021: np). From 1946 onward, aerial photography has demonstrated the ever-changing character of the beach and river estuary, as the amount of sand and width of the beach is impacted by atmospheric conditions. In years when typhoons are strong, such as in 2014, when the highest number of category five typhoons were recorded in Japan since the 1990s, much of the beach material can retreat into the bay allowing waves to break further out at sea but causing the beach width to narrow. In calmer seas and with the help of the river, the sand is redistributed, and within a year or two the beach can recover as it had done by 2017. Colliding forces

of river and tide create sand bars that sculpt dramatic shapes into the beach, containing the river parallel to the shoreline and impacting the location of the river mouth, which changes locations depending on the season (Figs. 7 and 8). The sand dunes that have protected inhabitants of Katoku for thousands of years—Jomon era (c. 14,500 to c. 300 BCE) pottery has been unearthed here—are dense with native plants, *adan* (pandanus) and *asagao* (morning glory), whose roots knot sand and soil providing a natural buffer. Given the complexity of the riverine and oceanographic dynamics, the site resembles a living textbook, an argument furthered by its archaeological and ecological value having a river that connects the mountains with the sea. This ecosystem is a critical habitat for endangered species, including nesting loggerhead and green and leatherback turtles, the latter of which last nested on the beach in 2002 and was the first recorded sighting of this species in Japan (Kamezaki et al. 2002). The Ryūkyū Ayu swims upriver to the mountains to spawn, a critically endangered freshwater shrimp named *Palaemon paucidens* C type (Takeda and Ikeda 2022) has been found here, and rare terrestrial hermit crabs, large and purple in color, live on the dune. On the day I visited with Katoku resident Jean-Marc Takaki, he spotted paw prints in the sand: "People don't believe me when I say the [rare and endangered] Amami black rabbits come down from the mountains to the beach" he said, but the damp sand had caught one in motion. Jean-Marc-san, who is French-Japanese, has lived in Amami since 2010 and is one of the most outspoken opponents of the seawall. Through close observation and private study, he has gained an intimate knowledge of Katoku's coastal dynamics and delicate ecosystem.¹ Inscribing in the sand to explain to a novice, he laid out the situation and its consequences (Fig. 9).

In response to a request by some of Katoku's residents, concerned about the village cemetery and threat to the border of their properties, in 2016 the prefecture proposed to build a 530 m × 6.5 m seawall along Katoku beach costing 530 million yen (approximately US \$3.6 million). Consultation with villagers and interested parties ensued, including Jean-Marc-san and his partner Hisami-san, local environmentalists, academics, activist lawyers, surfers, and concerned Amamians. Those involved with the protest movement say their concerns were initially dismissed, but when the Nature Conservation Society of Japan became involved, the prefecture formed a committee consisting of the village head and various officials and professors to discuss the wall's design. As a result of these meetings, in 2018 the design was downgraded to a 180 m × 6.5 m seawall at a cost of 320 million yen (approximately US \$2.2 million). To "protect" nature and the visual quality of the bay, it was proposed that vegetation should be planted in front of the seawall, hiding it from view. A Kagoshima-based construction company with a branch in Amami was contracted, and works began to prepare the site, including the removal of dune vegetation to create a throughway for heavy machinery and the construction of

¹ Together with other activists in Amami, Jean-Marc-san has set up an NPO and their website is an impressive database of scholarship, press articles, and news updates on Katoku available in Japanese and English: <https://amamiworldheritage.org/>.



Figure 1: The entrance to Katoku beach via the river. Fencing had been put in place in advance of the arrival of heavy machinery. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

huge concrete blocks. All the while, the protest and subsequent conflict grew into a bitter dispute, even involving the police, leading to discourse between the various stakeholders to break down.² Within the hamlet of only seventeen households, an ideological debate has ensued between “indigenous” residents who support construction and who tend to have long family ties to Katoku (and often the construction companies) and those moving in from “outside” of Katoku who oppose the seawall—those born in other areas of Amami or Japan (so-called I-turn and U-turn migrants) and who might even be conceptualized as “foreigners.”³ Others were caught between the social obligation to agree with the authorities and their old neighbors and their desire to protect nature and the uniqueness of the village, and to support the passionate “outsiders.”⁴

In such situations, experts are often called upon to bring clarity, but the field of coastal engineering and oceanography in Japan is similarly a site of contestation. Carrying out an assessment using drone footage, Japanese coastal engineers Nishi et al. 2020 concluded that strong typhoons in 2014 caused an isolated incident of erosion to the beach while historical aerial photography showed that erosion of the dune forest has been occurring since the 1940s. But rather than advising dune restoration via binding plants—a “nature-based” solution increasingly supported by international scientists (Perricone et al. 2023)—Nishi et al. recommended an engineering solution supporting the prefecture’s construction plan. Yet Atkins states that aerial photographic evidence is not sufficient to understand the

complexity of the site, which has a high/low tide differentiation of 2 m. Depending on the season, the river can flow uninterrupted into the sea or the creation of sandbars means it flows along the width of the beach before exiting. Since the beach had already narrowed in 2013 (a fact ignored by Nishi et al.), Atkins considers whether works carried out by the municipality to divert the course of the river—to stop it flowing along the beach—could have impacted the beach’s ability to recover by allowing the river to redistribute materials. This suggests ignorance of coastal dynamics has actually caused beach erosion in Katoku. As he writes: “Small changes to the existing dynamics can have large consequences with cumulative and compounding impacts” (Atkins 2021). This opinion is shared by coastal engineering expert Taka’aki Uda’s writing in relation to the situation across Japan where sand mining, the damming of rivers, and the concreting of embankments and cliffs is widespread. He suggests that by disrupting the replenishment of natural materials, of the sand, soil, and stone that coastlines need, the dynamics of natural systems are interrupted (2010: 3). In addition to works carried out on the beach, Kagoshima Prefecture has permitted licenses for sand dredging for the construction industry in the waters around Amami, and villagers have said that in the past, boats have even made their way into Katoku Bay. If these materials are removed, what is left to replenish the beach?

The second and most significant issue is whether a seawall would exacerbate erosion, destroying the beach beyond repair, making the village unlivable and the beach unsafe for both human and non-human residents. Uda argues that building hard structures to protect land undermines the natural system of the beach (2010). Whereas beaches disperse energy by allowing waves to “peel” along the sand, promoting downward percolation, hard structures “increase turbulence” and represent an unmoving “line in the sand” (Atkins 2021). This means any materials surrounding that structure—sand, stones, soil, plant, and animal life—will gradually be removed by the force of the waves, jeopardizing

² Threats and intimidation between residents in Katoku were documented in a *New York Times* article, which resulted in the police being called for the first time. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/13/world/asia/japan-katoku-seawall.html>. Accessed: December 12, 2023.

³ “I-turn” and “U-turn” are Japanese terms (spelt in katakana) to describes those moving to the countryside (*Inaka-turn*) from Japanese cities and those who have literally U-turned back to the areas where they or their family originate.

⁴ The translated terms “indigenous” and “outsider” are being used locally, to the extent of being written on some of the many protest placards found in Katoku erected by both sides of the debate.



Figure 2: The village of Wase in central Amami photographed by Douglas Haring circa 1951–1952. Douglas Haring Papers, University Archives, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.



Figure 3: Concrete walls in Toguchi Village, Amami Oshima. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

the integrity of the structure and the existence of the beach (Figs. 10 and 11).⁵ This action undermines the authorities' plans to "hide" the wall beneath vegetation—located next to a hard structure with nothing to anchor their roots, plants would not withstand a fast-flowing river, strong tide, or winds, especially in an extreme weather event. In 2014, the authorities erected sandbags to buttress the dune on which the cemetery is built. In 2015, residents and activists planted pandanus around this degraded area, and within eight years, these plants have provided significant restoration. While across the world resistance to concrete coastal structures is growing among scientists, the public, and bureaucrats alike, and "Integrated Coastal Management" being widely adopted, Japan lags painfully behind (Wakita and Yagi 2013). As an

⁵The nearby village of Kominato in south Amami provides an example of the failure of hard structures.

outsider, it is difficult to fathom why, but as anthropologist Shuhei Kimura states, "infrastructure is not always infrastructure only in a material sense: it can have many other symbolic or imaginative capacities" (2016: 28). Seawalls provide a sense of security or protection from aporetic forces even if they are technically deficient. But they are also symbols of modernization and repositories of huge economic revenue, tied to dysfunctional economic and environmental policy.

Extrastructure infrastructure

The second time I visited Katoku, I met with Eriko Minayoshi, the protestor I saw at the 70th anniversary ceremony. She corrected me that rather than being the lone protestor at the ceremony in November, she was not alone that day—eight

Figure 4: The Village of Kashiken in north Amami photographed by Douglas Haring circa 1951–1952. Photo: Douglas Haring Papers, University Archives, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.



Figure 5: The quay at Kashiken today, where the village also has a seawall, a concrete dam, and concrete embankments around its river. Photo: Charlotte .



others were there opposing the expansion of military bases on the island. In 2017, when I first visited Amami, I was surprised by the number of military vehicles on the roads. I knew Japan had a Self-Defense Force but naively thought the country strictly abided by the pacifist conventions drawn up after WWII. However, territorial tensions have been increasing, with North Korea testing ballistic missiles through Japanese territory and China making claims on Taiwan. I heard rumors that the Japanese government was building storage in the mountains for American missiles—it was not until I visited Katoku in 2023 that I saw the location of what appears to be one of these missile stores. Because of the neo-colonialism experienced by neighbors in Okinawa

(Nishiyama 2022; Higa 2024), Amamians are nervous about increased military presence, fearing the American Military will attempt to dominate their island also. These fears can be traced back to the reversion movement, with one local historian telling me that in 1952, before the island was returned to Japan, the US Military had proposed to “turn Amami into the next Hawaii.” But the US State Department, who were embroiled in the Korean war at the time, saw local protests as a distraction and the island’s geography—80% of which is mountainous—as an impediment to a permanent military base, and despite its strategic stronghold and marine access, agreed to hand Amami back to the Japanese. Although the recent return of the specter of US-supported military



Figure 6: A surfer waiting for a wave on Katoku Beach. Photo: Charlotte Linton.



Figure 7: The Katoku River carving channels into the sand. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

presence on the island is the result of current day geopolitics, the viability of building a costly military site on a remote mountainside can be traced back to the post-war period and the economic policy that has defined Amami for the past seventy years.

Since the 1950s, two acts of law written under the guise of development have provided huge income streams to Amami. Anthropologist Sueo Kuwahara explains the first is the nationwide “Remote Islands Development Act,” designed for “eliminating the backwardness caused by the isolation or remoteness from the mainland and for promotion of industries by developing social infrastructure” (2012: 42). This act has been revised approximately every ten years, accounting for changing social, economic, and political conditions. In the 1950s, advancing education and healthcare was a priority, while in the 1960s, transportation and

communication was the focus. In the 1970s, tourism facilitation and industrial development was on the agenda, and in the 1980s and 1990s, the role Japan’s “remote” islands play in defense of territory and marine resources was highlighted.⁶ Since the 2000s, the aim of the Act has been to promote the “valuable gaps” (ibid) between mainland Japan and its islands by recognizing their unique characteristics. While previously the purpose of this political intervention was to obtain for island residents comparable standards of living to those on the mainland, more recently it has been recognized that blanket homogenization puts at risk island “uniqueness” that contributes to the national character—including nature and biodiversity, access to marine

⁶ On account of its numerous islands and long coastline, Japan has the sixth largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), giving it sovereignty over a large but disputed area of territorial waters (Kuwahara 2012).

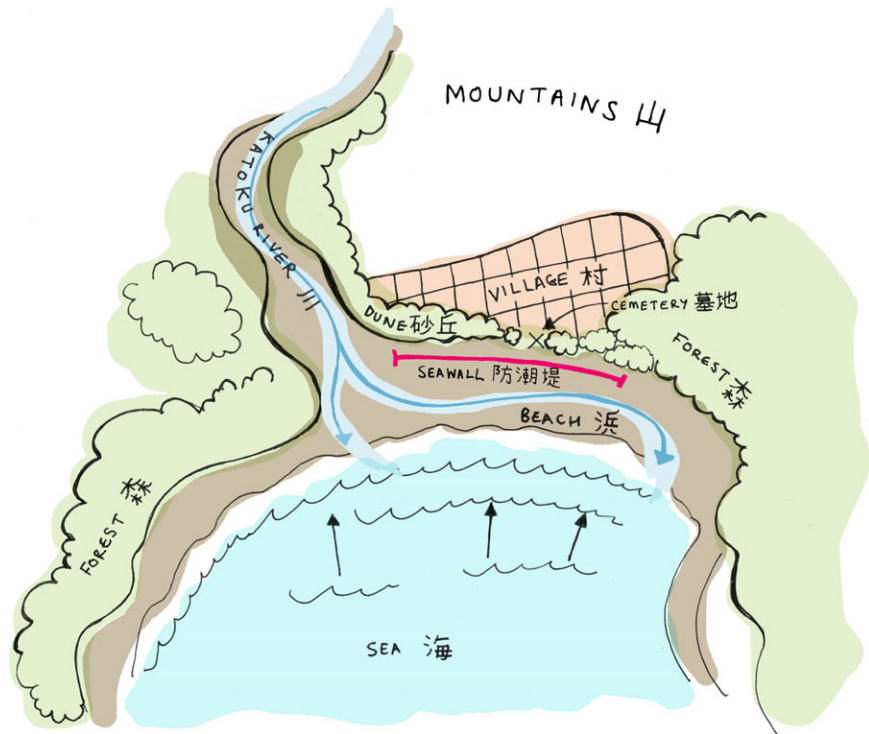


Figure 8: A diagram showing the flow of water on Katoku's pocket beach. Drawing: Charlotte Linton.



Figure 9: Jean-Marc-san explaining coastal dynamics in the sand. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

resources, tourism potential, and island's roles as havens for well-being and culture. Nevertheless, the rate of property development for tourism and military expansionism in Amami alone puts these new aims into question.

The second is the "Act on Special Measures for Promotion and Development for Amami," abbreviated as the "Amashin" Law (ibid: 42), whose term has been extended every five years since its conception in 1954. The Amashin Law was considered necessary to address inequality across the

Amami island group, following economic depression resulting from eight years of US occupation. It aimed to "reconstruct," "develop," and then "promote," but essentially it aims to support Amami's economy to reach self-sufficiency and ensure equivalent income levels to those on the mainland. After seventy years, it is still reaching for those aims, having found then lost the core industry of the local kimono cloth *Oshima tsumugi* in the 1960s, whose sales crashed alongside the economy in the late 1980s (Linton



Figure 10: A collapsed seawall on Uttabaru Beach in north Amami. Photo: Charlotte Linton.



Figure 11: A cross section of the natural dune "wall" that sits beside it. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

2020). Writing in 2012, Kuwahara says the Japanese government has sunk 1.44 trillion yen (around US \$10 billion) into the Amami islands via the Amashin Law and, like the monies devoted to the Remote Islands Development Act, around 80% of the total Amashin budget has been spent on public works. The widespread construction of roads, tunnels, bridges, dams, coastal defenses, and harbors has brought convenience to Amami, but opponents argue they have disfigured it in the process (Figure 12). As such, Kuwahara calls the Amashin Law "a devil in disguise" (2001: 77) as it has threatened to erase the island's identity.

Scholars of Japan will be aware of the country's poor record on the environment, which contrasts with the public image of Japan living in harmony with nature (Kagawa-Fox 2012: 3–8). Industrialization and economic activity since the Meiji Restoration (around 1868), which then exploded in the post-WWII period, has seen a range of man-made

environmental disasters and pollution events that have impacted society and destroyed ecosystems from the macro to the landscape scale (Walker 2010). Modern Japanese historian Gavan McCormack has identified the extreme and damaging nature of Japan's addiction to public works, which has dominated the national budget since the 1960s. Writing in 1995, McCormack references 1993, when 31.8 trillion yen (US \$211 billion) was spent on construction across Japan, equivalent to 43% of the national budget. By comparison, the US (with a land mass twenty five times that of Japan) spent the equivalent of 54 trillion yen (1995: 26–27). While works have been carried out under the guise of development and modernization—improving the efficiency, safety, and convenience of the sea and landscape for the health and wealth of its citizens—McCormack argues that corruption and a mismanaged economy is at the heart. He explains: "Construction is incidental to the reproduction of power



Figure 12: The harbor with tetrapods at Kashiken, Amami Oshima. Photo: Charlotte Linton.

and the distribution of profit” (ibid: 27), with public works projects maintaining snug relationships between construction companies, local bureaucrats, and politicians. A buoyant construction industry has been used to sustain gross domestic product (GDP) and guarantee local votes and jobs, especially in areas such as Amami, where opportunities are few. He says, “Construction is also a massive welfare system, whose beneficiaries run into the millions, an incubus on the state and society comparable to the mafia in other countries” (ibid). These accusations of mafia-style organized crime are not without grounds, since in 1993, a web of corruption led to multiple arrests (ibid: 28).

Although local gossip about the huge wealth of the owners of the main construction companies in Amami and Kagoshima is prevalent, I am not aware of any grounds to suggest corruption is active on the island. Yet, in line with Japan’s economic boom, employment figures for the construction industry peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, and today it remains one of the core industries and largest employment sectors on the island. As I have written elsewhere regarding forestry in Amami (Linton 2022), Japan is an extreme user of what Marxist geographer David Harvey calls the “spatiotemporal fix” (2001), a capitalist solution used to “fix” the problem of over-accumulation of surplus resources and labor and relocate them in new times and places where formally there was little economic activity. By sinking capital generated in Japan’s major cities into unnecessary public works in rural locales such as Amami, local cement and concrete plants get orders (using sand dredged from Kagoshima Prefecture’s waters); construction companies are given huge contracts; local people have work; and their wage labor stimulates the economy, providing taxation that contributes back to the public funding of construction work.

While McCormack was first writing about this issue almost thirty years ago, since little has changed, he continues to work on the topic. Despite a stagnant economy, huge public debt, and the advance of environmental and

engineering science, Japan continues to spend obscene amounts of money on both large and small infrastructure projects, engaging in what McCormack calls “‘extrastructure’ (works undertaken for their own sake or without obvious social need) investment” (2018: 168). Yet there are signs that changes in public opinion are on the rise. During an interview, one of my participants explained:

I am against development if possible. Maybe in a decade or so people will realize that we developed too much, and all the coral reefs along the coast died. People don’t realize how important the good old things are until they’re gone, and by the time they realize, it’s too late. Even if you think now that you want nature to be like it used to be, there’s nothing you can do about it... But [during the high growth period], if you were against [modernization], the construction workers and people who worked there would get very angry with you.

This situation is reflected in the debates around the reconstruction of post-tsunami Tohoku and the huge seawalls that have been (re)constructed along the coastline in the aftermath. McCormack has written how the Abe government, who regained power in 2012, used as one of their central campaigning slogans “making the country resilient” (*kokudo kyojinka*) and in 2013 made it official with the “Basic Law for National Resilience” (2018 : 170). Japan is a hot spot for natural disasters, and it is understandable that people want to feel safe. But to what extent can concrete infrastructure “protect people and property,” especially when the extremity of disasters goes “beyond expectation” (*soutei-gai*) (Kimura 2016: 25)? And to what extent might these infrastructures actually hamper survival?

In a 2016 paper, Kimura writes about the experience of a village in Iwate Prefecture, which was devastated by the tsunami that claimed thirty of its residents. He describes the tension between the authorities, who planned to build a 14-m-high seawall that would obliterate sea views, and residents who wanted to maintain a visible connection with the coast. Local fishermen felt the safety and effectiveness of

their work was impacted by their ability to watch “the ‘face’ of the sea” (ibid: 28). Prior to the spread of advance communication systems in the 1960s, residents too used perception to monitor the waves and watch the behavior of fish and animals (Littlejohn 2020: 25). If a tsunami was deemed imminent, they would evacuate to historically safe areas—trees or rocks that marked the reach of previous tsunamis. After the 1960s, a succession of dangerous typhoons and tsunamis led the government to construct seawalls, allowing them to negotiate risk on resident’s behalf. In 2011 this loss of agency had, in many sad cases, led residents to put too much trust in the ability of a seawall to protect them (Kimura 2016; Littlejohn 2020). In the years since 3.11, multiple journalists and scholars have written about communities resisting huge seawalls, attempting to negotiate the design or replace them with “non-technical” trees and markers that prioritize evacuation over prevention (Bird 2013; Kimura 2016; Yoneyama 2019; Littlejohn 2020). Yet the battles that ensue with the authorities are difficult to comprehend. Kimura (2016: 26) references Foucault’s theory of “governmentality” by way of explanation, suggesting the Japanese government use risk, danger, and crisis to control the population. Equally, the management of risk and the avoidance of blame is likely to be a motivating factor for the authorities.

When discussing the Katoku issue among friends on the island—a topic that has become so contentious in Amami that it demands hushed tones—many people bring up the risk of tsunami and say that locals have a right to protection. Yet in the event of a tsunami, the current wall design would offer little defense, since it only extends along a proportion of the beach and its height (6.5 m above sea level) is lower than the height of the village and cemetery, which at its lowest point sits at 8.5 m above sea level and at its highest point 16 m (Atkins 2021). This lack of understanding demonstrates that public discourse held across the island is being made without sufficient information at hand about the environment in Katoku, or the costs or technical deficiencies of the wall, despite the activists sharing this data widely. With the situation fraught, it is understandable that public debate has been stifled or gone underground, with few willing to engage in the details or vocally support the activists and break the myth of social harmony. While similar peaceful protests documented in nearby Okinawa to oppose the expansion of US military bases have, for the most part, seen many kinds of Japanese coming together against an outside force—the US Military, who have for seventy years caused social and environmental harm in Okinawa (Kosuzu 2011; Higa 2024)—the protest in Katoku has been internalized, pitching indigeneity against internationalism.⁷

The last course of action for activists has been to bring about a lawsuit to stop the works. Yet rather than bringing a suit solely on environmental grounds, to have a chance of winning, the lawyers are fighting using the language the government understands, namely economics.

⁷ Despite greater solidarity among citizens in Okinawa, Kosuzu similarly writes of conflict within communities between those who support and oppose the expansion of US military sites when individuals have vested interests (2011: 66).

“Even if we can save Katoku it doesn’t mean we can save Amami”

On a Saturday evening the day before *Shōgatsu* (Japanese New Year), the biggest public holiday in Japan, Kazuko and I drove through torrential rain to the offices of Wada-san who was waiting for us out of hours with a cat, the office emptied for the holidays. Wada-san has been involved with the Katoku issue from early on, attending public meetings and talking with residents whether they support the wall or not. In his day job, Wada-san works on civil law—land disputes, finance, inheritance, and divorce—but with the Katoku case he is the lawyer on the ground, assisting a group of around eight lawyers in Osaka working pro-bono for the Japan Environmental Lawyers Federation (JELF).⁸ With the residents as plaintiff, in 2019, JELF brought a lawsuit against Kagoshima Prefecture on the basis of the misuse of public funds for wasteful public works. On their website they state:

Whether the project has enough benefit compared with cost of the investment should be strictly examined and reviewed. If we cannot expect enough cost-performance, the expenditure should be regarded as illegal. This idea is quite reasonable, but the reason of illegality is not theoretically well discussed in Japan. We also do not have any legal system to stop clearly wasteful public works.

The construction at Katoku has been ordered by Kagoshima Prefecture, who oversee municipal governance in Amami, but is funded by central government. Criteria must be met for spending public funds, and the lawsuit is asking whether the prefecture is in breach of regulations. This attack on public works using an economic argument is a method being used by JELF in multiple lawsuits, including at Katoku. Prior to forming this strategy, JELF adopted the radical tactic of granting non-human entities personhood in their legal cases. In 1995, the chairman on the Katoku case, Taka’aki Kagohashi-san, led a suit against the prefecture to stop the construction of a golf course in Sumiyo-son, south Amami, where the mountains are inhabited by a range of endemic species, including endangered black rabbits (Kagohashi 2002). The case gained attention in the national and international media because the rabbit was named as a plaintiff—in effect, regarding the animal as a legal person.⁹ This form of environmental law, which originates in America and has had significant success in countries such as New Zealand (Sanders 2018), had never been used in Japan. Although it established a precedent, the case was lost. However, since the lawsuit occurred during Japan’s financial crash and the proceedings dragged on for years, the development was dropped for economic reasons. Today black rabbit numbers have recovered beyond expectation, and the forest is a World Natural Heritage Site. Wada-san explained the change in tactic rather bluntly: “Japan’s Ministry of the Environment is weak. So, from now on we have to do our part through our economic activities. It is difficult for Japan to change things through any kind of

⁸ <https://www.jelf-justice.org/jelf/wp-content/themes/jelf-justice/backnumber/english/essays/index.html>. Accessed: February 2, 2024.

⁹ Although this may seem radical, it should be noted that companies and corporations are treated as legal persons, providing the same legal rights as individuals.

movement. If you try to change something through a movement . . . your life expectancy would expire.”

In addition to the misuse of public funds, the lawyers are also arguing that the project violates Coastal Law by not taking into account the natural environment and misleading residents on the location of the wall. In plans and illustrations, the wall appears close to the dune and village on the “inland area.” But bringing the court to the beach at Katoku, including the judge, revealed the wall would actually be located on the beach side. This underlines concerns about the risk to the very fabric of the beach, since the river could run parallel to the wall, and the tide could buffer it during storm surges, removing sand and plant and animal life. Wada-san expressed his frustrations with this possible future by explaining that in places such as New Zealand and the US, oceanographers are increasingly recommending soft structures to tackle coastal erosion such as dune and flood plain restoration. Engineers have, in some cases, begun “managed realignment” by removing hard structures, a process that will become necessary with climate-induced sea level rise, a pertinent issue for an island nation such as Japan.¹⁰ Yet, Wada-san says the approach of Japan continues to be “concrete, concrete, concrete.”

Despite the arguments of Wada-san and his colleagues, the first session of JELF’s lawsuit against the seawall in the Kagoshima District Court, filed in 2019, was lost; in April 2024 the appeal in the High Court of Fukuoka was also dismissed, in effect ruling that there were no grounds to suggest that the spending of public funds on Katoku’s seawall was unreasonable. Yet both the Katoku lawyers and activists have stated a desire to fight on. During the intervening years since the lawsuit was launched, construction work at Katoku slowed due in part to the regular non-violent sit-ins held by protestors, who see their peaceful action as a last-resort resistance when heavy machinery arrives. There have been suggestions that the prefecture is nervous about the attention the court case and the protests have brought to the Japanese government’s contravention of promises made to UNESCO and the IUCN. Although Katoku is included in the buffer zone of the World Natural Heritage Site, the protection only applies to the forest not the beach. But the regulations around the river, which inhabits both, are not so clear. Yet, even if JELF’s appeal had been successful, Wada-san said: “It would still be difficult to cancel the construction since the Japanese government has very wide discretion on such decisions. That is why it is essential that local people take an interest in these matters and work on them . . . the most crucial thing is a conversation not with Kagoshima Prefecture but local people in Katoku.” Essentially, the lawsuit was a delay tactic to advance discourse and understanding and to reach a collective position with the residents to oppose the current wall design. But even with his professional experience dealing with domestic infighting, Wada-san recalled: “We couldn’t make it happen . . . I’ve gone to talk to them. It was really hard. It’s easy to fight with the residents. All you have to do is make your point and claim your own opinion. But it is very difficult to discuss.” Wada-

san’s testimony highlights the huge pressure that has been put on seventeen households in a remote hamlet to come to a consensus on a problem that has been constructed by social, political, and economic histories and policies at the national level. In this context, among people with different backgrounds and access to knowledge and exposure to the global movement of ideas, it is little wonder that the community has fractured and battle lines drawn.

The Japanese government is investing significant time and money to attract outsiders to repopulate rural areas such as Katoku, yet what has rarely been considered is that these young people bring their own ideals and politics with them. Local authorities seem ill-equipped to negotiate compromises between old and new ways of doing things, and in the case of Amami, it appears that the authorities have not been advised on how “business as usual” must be adapted when your island becomes a World Natural Heritage Site. If the municipal government had ordered an Environmental Impact Assessment before proposing a seawall in Katoku, the current wall design and the social strife that has followed might have been avoided.¹¹ Wada-san spoke of how local people are proud of Amami’s World Natural Heritage designation, thinking that it will bring the kind of protections that would stop a seawall being considered in places such as Katoku in the first place.¹² But the government have admitted that the reason for seeking World Natural Heritage recognition for sites across Japan is not primarily to protect nature but to boost the economy through tourism.¹³

Between my first fieldwork in 2017 and my return at the end of 2023, there was evidence of an uptick in tourism in Amami. Hotel complexes had expanded and restricted access to their beaches. Property prices had shot up, and land was being sold without the need for planning permission. Even the bakery where I buy *anpan* had introduced English labels in anticipation of an influx of visitors. As our interview came to a close, Wada-san explained: “Those who have the power in this world” think about what World Natural Heritage allows them to do from an economic standpoint: “‘That’s how we can do this kind of business. This is how the land can be moved. This is how the money is made.’ That’s what they talk about.” He looked dejected and stressed that Katoku is just one example of the many social, economic, and environmental issues that the island faces, saying: “even if we can save Katoku, it doesn’t mean we can save Amami.”

Conclusions

When meeting with Wada-san, my research assistant, Kazuko, who moved to Amami with her family from Tokyo after 3.11, asked a critical question. She explained that there are those in Katoku who support the construction work while recognizing the ecological importance of the site. They are

¹¹ In contrast, see Toyoda (2013) and the community approach to environmental restoration on Sado Island, Japan, that treated natural resources as a “commons,” drawing together experts and citizens to problem solve.

¹² Jean-Marc-san has been trying to get UNESCO and the IUCN to take an interest in the Katoku issue for many years, but so far, these organizations have not pursued an investigation.

¹³ See Brasor, Philip. “Of Cats and Rabbits: UNESCO World Heritage Candidate Caught in a Bind over Tourism Drive”. *The Japan Times*. September 14, 2019.

¹⁰ See examples from EU-funded project RISC-KIT: <https://coastal-management.eu/coastal-element/coastal-infrastructure.html>. Accessed: January 10, 2024.

also aware that the wall is technically deficient and unlikely to save people or property in the event of a natural disaster. It has been suggested that economics are therefore influencing public opinion. So, she asked: “Is it also not important to protect the livelihoods of people, those whose families include employees of the construction companies who are set to gain financially from the wall?” The construction industry in Amami has propped up the local economy, providing work for local people for the past seventy years, even if wages are low for regular workers, while profits are huge for company owners. At the same time, if the beach is saved, there will be those who will economically benefit from Amami’s nature, working as tour guides, running shops or cafés, and welcoming tourists to the beach. This reliance on construction and tourism in Amami demonstrates that the various aims of the Remote Islands Development Act and the Amashin Law are being fulfilled in their ability to funnel money into development and support job creation.

Throughout its history, nature has been turned to daily in Amami as a resource used to sustain the community socially, spiritually, and economically. Although the environment is no longer relied upon in the same ways, nature is still considered a resource to be exploited. Individuals collect and sell shellfish and seaweed from the beach, while corporations take sand. The beach can be turned into a construction site, but it can also be a place for recreation and well-being. The principal difference between the 1950s, when development began, and today is that the potential for human exploitation to do harm is vastly increased: huge ships can denude the seabed of sand, disrupting the natural movement of sedimentary materials; missile stores can be built on impossible, mountainous sites, displacing wildlife from the forest; and international travel and disposable incomes means that huge numbers of people can visit sites previously considered remote. The example of Katoku demonstrates that the exploitation of Amami’s natural resources, in the manner that has occurred since the post-war period, is outdated and does not offer a sustainable future for humans and non-humans alike.

The situation at Katoku highlights how sustainable solutions to protect our environments, their communities and biodiversity, are often sought with ends-orientated goals—whether via the creation of World Natural Heritage Sites or through the symbolic simplicity of a seawall. Amami is often compared with nearby Yakushima Island, which gained World Natural Heritage status in 1993, the first site to be recognized in Japan. A tourism boom followed, leading to issues of overcapacity, environmental pollution, and the desecration of sacred sites (Song and Kuwahara 2016), contravening the aim to protect the environment and instead exacerbating a problem. Having achieved World Natural Heritage status in 2019, and currently experiencing its own tourism boom, Amami could be considered at a midway point in its tourist development, leading one to ask, which way will Amami go? Will it follow the trajectory of Yakushima or forge a path toward truly sustainable tourism, if this can even exist?

When exchanging emails with a colleague about Katoku, he wrote: “A small island is a small world, we need to be

mindful of the ideas of many different people in our lives.” So, what kind of future do the people want? And how can relations between the “many different people in our lives,” those on both sides of the debate in Katoku, be repaired? Contacts in Amami hope that the negative outcome of the court case means it is not the end of the road for Katoku, even if the men in hard hats have returned. Although not a “win” for environmentalists, like the beach itself where small changes to its dynamics can have large consequences, what happens at Katoku and the precedent it sets could have compounding impacts for similar sites across Japan.

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