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Request for a Study of the “Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, the northern part of Okinawa Island and Iriomote Island” Natural World Heritage Candidate Site

We represent Japan Environmental Lawyers for Future (JELF), an environmental organization comprising about 450 lawyers throughout Japan. JELF is Japan’s largest environmental organization of lawyers. In partnership with other Japanese environmental organizations and academic societies concerned with the ecosystem, we are proceeding with a lawsuit to protect Katoku Beach, located in Setouchi Town of Kagoshima Prefecture, from large artificial structures. We hereby present the following request to the IUCN.

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In advance of the World Heritage Committee’s upcoming session, scheduled for July 16-31, 2021, we respectfully submit this letter to request that the World Heritage Committee review the issues regarding Katoku Coast at the session and order Kagoshima Prefecture to preserve Katoku Coast.

As an initial matter, Kagoshima Prefecture has launched a project to construct a 3 storey high, 180m long seawall on the shoreline of Katoku Beach (the “**Construction Project**”). To

protest against the Construction Project, local citizens of Katoku and supporters of the local citizens, represented by a group of attorneys of the Japan Environmental Lawyers Federation (“JELF”), have filed a lawsuit against Kagoshima Prefecture to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Katoku.

As the World Heritage Committee reviews the nomination for the property of “Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima and Iriomote, as well as the Yanbaru Region in the north of Okinawa Island (the “**Amami Property**”) as Japan’s newest UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site at the upcoming session, we request that the Committee order Kagoshima Prefecture to preserve Katoku Coast.

IUCN nominated the Amami Property in its World Heritage Evaluations 2020 and 2021 as Japan’s UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. We welcome this development immensely. We have been working to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Amami Oshima.

If the Committee decides to add the Amami Property to the list of UNESCO World Natural Heritage Sites, Japan, as the State Party, will recognize “the duty of ensuring...the protection, conservation,” of the Amami Site, and “do all it can do to this end, to the utmost of its own resources.” (Article 4 of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage). This will inevitably require Japan to determine a buffer zone and implement measures to preserve the integrity of the World Natural Heritage Site.

A very diverse biota exists in the environments surrounding Katoku Beach and Katoku River. A pocket beach at the river mouth of Katoku River is found along the shoreline of Katoku Coast. This beach is one of the very few naturally preserved beaches in Amami Oshima where no concrete objects are constructed.¹ Rich sand dunes formed in the river mouth of Katoku River have high disaster prevention capabilities, and they have protected the environments behind the river mouth. Ryukyu Ayu, a species of fish endemic to the Ryukyu Islands, inhabits around Katoku Coast, and it swims upstream of Katoku River from the pocket beach for spawning. Sea turtles visit the beach annually for spawning, and even leatherback sea turtles have visited the beach for spawning in the past. No one has spotted leatherback sea turtle’s spawning in any other parts of Japan.

The Amami Property includes the upper streams of Katoku River. The streams that flow down steep hills have been a precious source for the Katoku community formed around the river mouth of Katoku River. The forests behind the community, Katoku River, and the Katoku community have together formed a culture unique to Amami Oshima. Today, the nature of Katoku Coast and Katoku River have attracted people of younger generations, and they have moved in to the Katoku community.

Responding to the nomination of Amami Oshima as a World Natural Heritage Site, the Japanese government have recognized the value of Katoku River and Katoku Coast and designated a buffer zone. Considering the importance of the natural and cultural heritage of Katoku, this is good news.

¹ IUCN’s World Heritage Evaluations 2020 and 2021, at page 28 (stating “[t]he State Party also confirmed that Katoku River, the last free-flowing river within the Amami-Oshima Island component part, will not be subject to any new constructions of river structures in the future”).

Kagoshima Prefecture, a regional authority, however, is still in pursuit of its Construction Project. To achieve the principle of preserving the integrity of the World Natural Heritage Site, construction of concrete objects should be prevented regardless of whether they will be built within the buffer zone.

If we use the best of the world's knowledge and capabilities, we are able to prevent disasters and preserve nature at the same time. The Japanese government is capable of doing so. Especially given the rich volume of sands that we have at this pocket beach, natural sand beaches maintain high disaster prevention capabilities. Interfering with the natural movements of the sands will destroy the natural ecosystem and result in creating vulnerabilities in the area.

According to IUCN's World Heritage Evaluations 2020 and 2021, the State Party (i.e., Japan) confirmed that Katoku River will not be subject to any new constructions.² This is not supported by facts. Katoku Beach is a pocket beach spreading around the river mouth of Katoku River. Katoku River is, therefore, part of Katoku Beach. Katoku River's waters flow across Katoku Beach and reach the northern part of Katoku Beach depending on the seasons. This contributes to the movements of the sands of Katoku Coast. If the Japanese Government is going to preserve Katoku River and Katoku Coast as a buffer zone, it must face the fact that Katoku River and Katoku Coast are inseparable.

The rich natural heritage preserved in Amami Oshima is so valuable that it should be carried on to the people of next generations. We have experienced in human history that we lose the value of nature as we destroy one element to another of it. Buffer zone is a zone where we reevaluate the value of nature and overcome challenges to preserve the value for the future. The Japanese Government is failing to recognize the severity of these challenges and trying to avoid scrutiny by wrongly contending that the "seawall would be distant enough to avoid negative impacts on the river" In sum, we request that the World Heritage Committee demand the Japanese Government and Kagoshima Prefecture stop the Construction Project and overcome challenges to preserve the nature of Katoku Coast.

Sincerely yours,



Naoki Ikeda, Esq.
Executive Director

² IUCN's World Heritage Evaluations 2020 and 2021, at page 28 (stating "[t]he State Party noted that the seawall would be distant enough to avoid negative impacts on the river").