

November 2, 2022

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“Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima, Northern Okinawa Island and Iriomote Island” World Heritage Requests

JELF is a Japanese environmental protection organization comprising 450 lawyers nationwide. JELF has called for a halt to the construction of a seawall on the Katoku Coast of Amami Oshima Island because it would damage the natural environment. In addition, our members are filing a lawsuit against Kagoshima Prefecture on behalf of prefectural citizens, including residents of Katoku Village, who oppose the construction of a seawall on the Katoku Coast.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has prepared four requirements for the Japanese government to achieve the integrity of World Heritage sites. In response, the Japanese government is currently compiling a report and preparing to submit it to the UNESCO World Heritage Commission. However, the government’s report conceals the serious problems surrounding the Amami Oshima Katoku Coast, a World Heritage buffer zone. We are therefore reporting this grave problem to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

The Amami Oshima Katoku Coast is a pocket beach at the mouth of the Katoku River. Because the Katoku River headwaters are covered with forest inscribed as a

World Heritage Site, the Japanese government has designated the Katoku River Basin and the Katoku Coast as World Heritage Buffer Zones. Even the IUCN report¹ released prior to World Heritage Site inscription pointed out the importance of protecting the Katoku River and Katoku Coast. The government promised that it would not build river structures on the Katoku River in the future.²

However, the construction of a concrete seawall is about to proceed at the mouth of the Katoku River. The Japanese government says of the seawall, “The government has stated that the embankment (the proposed construction site) is far enough away so as not to adversely affect the river,”³ which is a lie. The Katoku River changes its flow near the mouth of the river depending on the season, pouring fresh water into the sea from both the north and south sides of the Katoku coast. Depending on the season, there is also a river flow near the seawall construction area. It is not possible to distinguish between the Katoku Coast and the Katoku River. Indeed, because the Katoku Coast is a small coast, there can be no such thing as a sufficient distance to preclude an adverse effect on the river by the coastal embankment (the planned construction site).

Although the Japanese government designated the Katoku Coast a buffer zone for the World Heritage site, the nature conservation policy for the coast is exactly the same before and after its designation as a buffer zone. The construction of the seawall is being moved forward without any consideration of the disaster prevention capabilities of the natural coast. According to World Natural Heritage policy, measures to maximize the disaster prevention capacity of natural beaches should be considered, and we have made proposals. However, Kagoshima Prefecture and the central government have conducted no scientific studies at all, and have made no effort to maintain the natural environment. They plan to pile sand in front of the seawall and plant *adan* (*Pandanus odoratissimus*). However, because the seawall projects too far out on the sea side, the sand accumulated by typhoons and storms is quickly lost. The prefecture and government are aware of this and say that if the sand is swept away, they will pile it up again. Their planned safeguards offer mere peace of mind.

To make matters worse, they are trying to build an approach road along the Katoku River to build the seawall. There are endangered species such as Ryukyu ayu and suji shrimp at the mouth of the Katoku River. The construction work will take a long time, and it is clear that the artificial approach road will have a negative impact on the Katoku River ecosystem. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee should never allow such construction. If we are to strive for the integrity of the World Natural Heritage site, we must not carry out such reckless approach road construction.

According to the IUCN report, the Japanese government will perform seawall construction pursuant to an “agreement with local communities.” “Local” refers to Katoku Village, but nearly half of the village thinks it is better not to have a seawall. The younger generation in particular is opposed. Passing on what we have learned from World Heritage sites to future generations as well as to the present generation is the most important concept of World Natural Heritage, and in this respect as well, seawall construction on the Katoku Coast is incompatible with the thinking behind World Heritage sites.

The seawall will supposedly protect the hinterland from the waves caused by typhoons. However, a cemetery on the sea side of the hinterland has gravestones that are more than 200 years old, indicating that the area has never been eroded historically. The amount of sand on this coast is stable, and everyone—including Kagoshima Prefecture

— acknowledges that there will be no retreat of the coastline in the long run. Even if some land is protected by the seawall, its extent will be several meters. And there have been no scientific simulations of the extent to which Kagoshima Prefecture will be harmed.

The political policy regarding the Katoku seawall is a test of the Japanese government's basic thinking on the World Natural Heritage. We hope the UNESCO World Heritage Committee will not dismiss the construction of the seawall on the Katoku Coast as a minor problem.

¹ IUCN World Heritage Evaluations 2020 and 2021. JAPAN-AMAMI-OSHIMA ISLAND, TOKUNOSHIMA ISLAND, NORTHERN PART OF OKINAWA ISLAND, AND IRIOMOTE ISLAND (JAPAN) – ID N° 1574.

² “The 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.” (Ibid., Japan 4.2, p. 8).

³ “The State Party noted that the seawall would be distant enough to avoid negative impacts on the river” (Ibid.).