



CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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International Conservation Groups Call on Bush and Koizumi to Save the Okinawa Dugong

New Airbase Would Destroy Essential Dugong Habitat

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(California, USA/Okinawa, Japan) - A coalition of hundreds of US and international conservation groups representing over 10 million people sent a letter today to President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi urging the two leaders to cancel a plan to construct a new air base on top of a coral reef near Henoko, Okinawa, the feeding ground of the last remaining Okinawa Dugong (sea cow). Biologists believe building this landing strip could doom these gentle marine mammals to extinction.

The plan calls for Japan to build a new military base for American use atop coral reefs--effectively destroying the remaining habitat of the gentle dugong in Japan. The 1.5 mile-long airbase would also permanently disrupt one of the most biologically diverse areas in the Pacific.

The coral reefs in question provide important habitat for numerous rare wildlife species including the endangered dugong, a Japanese cultural icon related to the manatee, and three species of sea turtle. Local residents voted against the airbase project in a referendum, but Japanese and US authorities are ignoring their voices.

A coalition of US and Japanese conservation groups went to court in September 2003 to stop the project <http://www.earthjustice.org/news/display.html?ID=684>. The case is currently being heard in US District Court in San Francisco. The lawsuit asks the US Department of Defense to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) by publicly assessing the impacts of the proposed project on the Okinawa dugong. The NHPA requires US agencies to assess the impacts of their activities on cultural icons of foreign nations. Because of their significance to Okinawan culture, dugongs are included on a Japanese government list of protected cultural properties.

"The Department of Defense has a legal duty to protect the cultural resources and national monuments of other nations, especially our allies," said Martin Wagner of Earthjustice, who is representing the coalition in the United States. "The Okinawa dugong is a cultural icon and national monument in Japan. This vanishing species deserves the same protection and respect that we give to the Washington Monument or bald eagle."

The letter sent today was signed more than 400 organizations representing more than ten million concerned citizens worldwide.

"Construction of the new airbase would cause severe ecological damage to one of the most diverse ecosystems on earth," said Peter Galvin of Center for Biological Diversity who organized the letter campaign. "For this reason, conservation groups around the world are asking President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to cancel the base construction plan and protect the Okinawa dugong, a creature recognized as a national monument in Japan."