

Rare Japanese Dugong Threatened by U.S. Military Base

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for [National Geographic News](#)

The rare Okinawa dugong has been classified as “critically endangered” on Japan’s Ministry of the Environment Red List, the Japanese equivalent to the U.S. government’s endangered species list, officials announced this month.

About 100,000 dugongs—relatives of the manatees—live in the coastal waters of the South Pacific and Indian oceans.



The Okinawa dugong is the northernmost population, and scientists believe only about 50 remain.

Environmental groups say the dugong’s addition to the Red List is long overdue and expressed hope that the new designation will come with stronger actions to protect the marine mammals.

Specifically, conservationists hope that the move will back up legal action already underway to halt the expansion of a U.S. military base on the island of Okinawa into prime dugong habitat.

“This listing is a significant action,” said Peter Galvin, conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity in Shelter Cove, California.

“The dugong is already listed as a protected cultural monument in Japan and has been known to be critically endangered for quite some time,” Galvin said.

“But [until now] the Japanese government had not actually officially placed it on the list.”

Military Threat

Okinawa is the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, an archipelago that stretches from Japan’s southern island of Kyushu to Taiwan (see map).

Dugongs play a central role in the culture and mythology of Okinawa, Galvin said. The animals are associated with creation and mermaid myths and are considered harbingers of natural disasters such as tsunamis.

“Okinawa is a fascinating place, and the dugong is revered there,” Galvin said.

Historic dugong population numbers are difficult to come by. But based on the ubiquitous presence of the animals in Okinawan lore, wildlife groups estimate that thousands—if not tens of thousands—swam near the island about 300 years ago.

Like their manatee cousins, the gentle giants forage on sea grass, growing up to 10 feet (3 meters) long and packing on more than 1,000 pounds (454 kilograms).

While large sharks and saltwater crocodiles have been known to prey on dugongs, cases of predation are rare, making humans the most likely culprits in the dugong decline.

For decades the animals have been tangled in fishing nets, have had their habitat filled in for development projects, and have seen their food disappear under silt-filled runoff from eroded soils, conservationists say.

As part of their efforts to protect the dugong, the Center for Biological Diversity has been leading a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Defense.

The U.S. military has maintained a strong presence in Okinawa since World War II, with more than 30,000 personnel currently stationed on the island.

The lawsuit addresses a planned relocation of the Marine Corps' Futenma Airbase, which sits in a densely populated site, to a more isolated stretch of shoreline in Camp Schwab, according to the U.S. military.

But the project requires expanding runways into a bay that "is the richest area of sea grass in Okinawa," Galvin said. "It's the best of the last habitat for the dugong."

Moving Ahead

Marine Corps spokesperson Garron Garn in Okinawa said via email that the expansion project is designed to meet the military unit's operational needs.

The "exact location of the airfield was determined by higher authorities in the U.S. and Japanese governments," he said, and declined further comment.

A followup request for information from the U.S. Forces Japan public affairs office remained unanswered at press time.

In an August 15 article in the military newspaper the Stars and Stripes, Japanese and U.S. officials said that the dugong listing isn't expected to delay the planned construction.

The newspaper also quoted Ministry of the Environment spokesperson Harumi Nakajima

as saying the listing is meant simply to inform the public that dugongs are at risk.

The agency does not plan to restrict activities at dugong feeding grounds as part of the new classification, she said.