

## **Marines and Manatees**

# A Proposed U.S. Base in Okinawa Threatens Endangered Dugongs

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*by Jeff Shaw*

When Napoleon Bonaparte was told of the peace-loving Okinawan culture, whose values precluded maintaining a standing army, he scoffed. Surrounded by great and powerful neighbors, he opined, such a nation could not long survive.

Years later, the French despot's stance was vindicated. Today, Japanese and American military bases exist throughout Okinawa's subtropical ecosystems. For more than 100 years, Tokyo and Washington were content with domination of the land. Now, say environmental groups on both sides of the Pacific, the United States Marine Corps has come for the sea as well.

Plans are in place for a first-of-its-kind sea-based heliport for the U.S. Marines. Built directly on top of a sensitive coral reef, the mammoth air station's runway will reach a mile into the Pacific Ocean. Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) says that the heliport would smother the life support system of multiple endangered species—among them the critically endangered dugong (manatee), sacred to locals. Only 50 of these genetically distinct creatures survive in the region, comprising the northernmost population. Along with five other environmental groups from Okinawa, mainland Japan and the United States, CBD has filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court against the Department of Defense seeking to stop the sea base.

"Okinawa is sometimes called the 'Galapagos of the East' because of the incredible species diversity found there," says Galvin, a biologist. "Clearly, this is not the place for another military base."

"The coral reef is going to be destroyed, the dugong habitat is going to be destroyed, and there's going to be pollution in what is a pretty clean body of water," predicts Jonathan Taylor, a professor at California State University-Fullerton. "There's also going to be tremendous noise pollution, which will affect wildlife inland."

Besides the dugong, base construction could push other endangered animals over the brink, scientists and activists fear. "The Henoko Sea is very rich in biological diversity," says Makishi Yoshikazu of Okinawa Environmental Network, a local activist group at the forefront of a growing social movement on both sides of the Pacific.

Three endangered species of sea turtle—the green, hawksbill and loggerhead—lay eggs on beaches near the base site. Reefs in Okinawa support more than 1,000 species of fish, attracting scuba divers from all around the world to the warm, clear waters. The variety of marine life divers can see here is second only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Off the coast of Henoko village, where the new base is slated for construction, surveys recently uncovered 1,000 types of mollusks—including several that were previously undiscovered. Okinawan scuba guide Tanahara Seishu says Henoko's sea is critical dugong habitat. Based on his photographs of "dugong trenches"—fissures in the sea grass left by feeding animals—he concludes, "Henoko is the main feeding ground of the dugong."

The U.S. military makes two arguments: that building the sea base is a Japanese government project, hence outside American jurisdiction; and that the sea base would replace a much resented base on land, thus reducing the "footprint" of the U.S. military on Okinawa Island proper. "It would be inappropriate for the U.S. Marine Corps to discuss a [government of Japan] project," says Captain Christopher Perrine, an officer based at Camp Butler.

Environmental groups are extremely skeptical, in part because of documents obtained by the Center for Biological Diversity under the Freedom of Information Act. The paperwork shows U.S. Marine Corps officials granting Japan permission to conduct surveys of the Henoko site and even allowing the surveyors to set up a field office at America's nearby Camp Schwab.

Marine Air Station Futenma is one of the least-popular bases with Okinawans because it surrounds densely populated Ginowan city. Locals resent the base's noise, the pollution it creates, and worry about potential aircraft accidents. Advocates say moving the base offshore would reduce these impacts. Perrine says that the U.S. Marine Corps "enthusiastically supports" moving Futenma offshore as an "effort to reduce the amount of land used by U.S. forces on Okinawa."

Local opposition to the sea base is strong. Voters in the affected areas, Henoko and Nago, overwhelmingly rejected the project in a non-binding 1997 plebiscite. Even Iha Yoichi, the mayor of Ginowan, where Futenma occupies 40 percent of the land, strongly opposes moving the base offshore. "Building a new airport in Henoko only destroys nature," he says. "It is not a solution for residents in Ginowan, who suffer from incessant aircraft noise and the constant fear that aircraft might crash on their homes any moment."

Politically isolated as Japan's poorest prefecture, Okinawa—which has a culture and history distinct from the mainland—has been forced to house a disproportionate number of U.S. military installations and troops. Thirty-eight American military facilities already dominate one-fifth of the southern island's land; though Okinawa is less than one percent of Japan's territory, it provides 75 percent of the acreage for America's Japanese bases.

Muneyoshi Kaiyo, a former mayor of Henoko, is now to be found staffing a protest camp at the only road into town. "The people have been fighting for eight years to stop this project," he says. "We are hoping to protect this beautiful ocean, and to increase the number of dugong here."

Regardless, some think it's unlikely the U.S. and Japan will back down. According to Taylor, "The Japanese have treated Okinawa as if it were expendable, so the chances of Okinawan protests being successful are not that great. Japan is caught between two opposing forces—one side being Okinawan protests, and the other side being the U.S. It's pretty clear which side is more powerful."

Chalmers Johnson, president of the California-based Japan Policy Research Institute, goes a bit further: "Could they give a damn about killing off the dugong, or killing off one of the last healthy reefs in the islands?" he asks. "No, it's more of the same: Tokyo and Washington ganging up on the Okinawans, and there's not much they can do about it."

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