

**Animal Welfare Institute • Born Free USA • Center for Biological Diversity
Endangered Habitats League • Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental Protection Information Center • Howling for Wolves
International Fund for Animal Welfare • International Marine Mammal Project of Earth
Island Institute • Klamath Forest Alliance • Natural Resources Defense Council
Save the Manatee**

March 19, 2019

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry,

We request your assistance in urging the U.S. Department of Defense to temporarily stop all construction activities in Henoko and Oura bays in Okinawa, Japan. Despite an ongoing lawsuit challenging the Department's failure to abide by U.S. environmental laws and despite clear damage to two of Okinawa's most environmentally and culturally important bays, Department officials are acting rashly and causing irreparable harm to the environment as construction moves forward on this new airbase in these waters.

Worse, the Department's actions fly in the face of a recent democratic referendum on February 24, 2019, in which an overwhelming majority of voters in Okinawa opposed the base construction in a non-binding referendum. This momentous vote highlighted the broad and heartfelt local opposition to the base's construction. The base construction is also opposed by Okinawa's new governor, Denny Tamaki, who has strongly urged Japan's Defense Ministry to stop work on the project.

The proposed Marine Corps airbase will permanently destroy two ecologically rich bays in Okinawa. Early construction activities are already beginning to devastate sensitive coral reefs and sea grass beds that are key habitat for the critically endangered Okinawa dugong — a relative of the Florida manatee. Completion of this airbase without compliance with U.S. environmental laws will likely result in the extinction of these gentle marine mammals. Dugongs have long been revered by indigenous Okinawans, and they are objects of national cultural significance under Japan's Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

The Defense Department has a long history of acting as a good steward by protecting the environment and land under its care, and at the same time ensuring our nation's security — the two are complementary and compatible. The Department should not blithely plow ahead with a controversial base and rush to destroy Henoko and Oura bays out of expediency.

Driving the Okinawan dugong extinct would not only be a permanent blight on the Department of Defense — it would also represent a moral failing of the highest order. Our own natural

heritage is at risk when we destroy sensitive ocean habitats and endangered species. We would not condone such activities at home, nor should we condone them abroad.

A lawsuit pending in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals is challenging the Department of Defense's failure to comply with its mandatory duties to protect Okinawa's cultural heritage under the National Historic Preservation Act. To sanction the Department's construction activity not only undermines the environment; it also undermines the rule of law and ability of citizens of this nation to ensure their government abides by its own laws.

We the undersigned groups ask you to use your Congressional oversight and legislative powers to request that the Department of Defense cease its stubborn behavior and address the Okinawa base construction in a thoughtful and respectful manner that complies with all U.S. environmental laws.

Sincerely,

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