

IUCN World Heritage Programme
c/o Ulrika Åberg
28 Rue Mauverney
CH-1196 Gland
Switzerland

9 October, 2019

Dear Dr. Åberg,

Please find the following opinions of local residents mostly from the western area of Iriomote Island. The English text is written with the help of Dr. Tadashi Kajita, University of the Ryukyus. If you have any question on the document, please contact me as well as Dr. Kajita by the following e-mail addresses.

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Sincerely yours,

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Opinions about nomination of Iriomote Island
to the World Natural Heritage

9 October, 2019

Mamoru Shoyama

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I am not originated from Okinawa Prefecture and immigrated here with the admiration of the precious nature of Iriomote Island 44 years ago. Working as a science teacher at local elementary and junior high schools, I have been teaching children the richness and beauty of nature in Iriomote Island, especially using the Serpent Eagle as primary teaching material. After retiring, I participated in environmental protection activities as members of the Rare Animal and Plant Species Protection Committee of the Ministry of the Environment; Okinawa Prefectural Wildlife Conservation Manager; and National Park Volunteer. I was also the head of the Uehara Public Hall Union (including public halls of Uehara, Nakano, Urauchi, Sumiyoshi, and Funaura) two years ago, and become a present member of the Iriomote Island Sub-local Meeting under the Regional Liaison Committee as the representative of Public Halls of the Western area of Iriomote Island. In this Sub-local Meeting, I am responsible for reflecting the opinion from residents (primarily from the Western area) to the Action Plan of Iriomote Island.

Regardless of how the nomination of the island to the World Heritage was impressive to me, as I have been enchanted with its valuable and beautiful nature of Iriomote, unfortunately, there are undeniable concerns for the nomination.

First of all, I have to point out the fact that many residents have negative opinions on the nomination. According to the survey performed by Taketomi Town two years ago, 41% of residents were against the

registration, far more than 28% in favor. I attended the meeting with IUCN field inspectors two years ago, and I showed this fact with the leading causes that residents anticipated the nomination. They were the lack of information disclosure to the residents, delays in the administrative response, especially inadequate infrastructure, and concerns and dissatisfaction with the increasing number of tourists.

After the last nomination and withdrawal last year, I know that Taketomi Town and Okinawa Prefecture officials have been working on these issues. However, the concerns that I reported two years ago have not been solved yet. With this situation, as the residents on this island, we cannot accept the registration of the isle to World Heritage. Here, I'm reporting the renewed opinions that I collected from many local people from the Western Area of the island together with my concerns.

Deterioration of the natural environment and anxiety of residents due to an increase in tourists

1. Experts and the government recognize that it is essential to control the total amount of tourists to Iriomote Island. However, this issue remains unresolved, and it seems that the state party doesn't know how to tackle it. The nature of small islands such as Iriomote Island is fragile and will only be devastated if it is heavily loaded even in a short period. Due to the increased number of tourists, a small sacred stream for a local community, which has never been subject to tourism, became a tourist spot that has been causing black looks from the local people.

Also, many people worried about the further increase in tourists due to the World Heritage nomination. The number of accidents such as injuries on the field activities has also increased, and the burden on local fire brigade members (who are not full-time employees, but mostly volunteers and responsible for their jobs) is rising.

The number of traffic accidents due to an increase in rental cars is also increasing. Last year, seven Iriomote cats died by roadkill.

2. Many tourists use tourist spots that do not have toilets so that they pollute the surrounding environment. It is finally recommended to use a portable toilet from this year, but it is not a fundamental solution, because

the use increases the amount of waste and garbage to be treated on the island.

3. There is no sewerage system on Iriomote Island. Domestic wastewater flows directly into the ocean, and coastal pollution has been pointed out. Also, a shortage of water for daily use will become a regular issue due to increasing tourists. We had urgent town broadcasts repeatedly for saving water due to water shortages during the high tourist season (at the beginning of May as well as in the Summer vacation season in 2019).

Regarding residents' discontent with administrative responses related to natural heritage nomination

4. Emerging tourist guides who have no knowledge or experience about the nature and history of Iriomote Island are attracting a large number of customers. Those guides who want only to make money are in trouble with native nature guides who place importance on environmental conservation. This is just planned to be regulated by the Natural Guides Ordinance, but its effectiveness has been questioned because no detailed enforcement rules have been established.

5. Japan is an earthquake-prone country, and there are no measures to deal with large-scale disasters, such as there is no place for many tourists to evacuate when a massive tsunami comes.

6. Two years ago, the Taketomi Natural Environment Conservation Ordinance was amended, and the town advertised it a lot as if precious organisms were being protected by the law. However, there has been no staff who are in charge of protecting the selected rare species. Because there is no actual patrol activity, this is the present situation that precious wildlife is poached and robbed.

7. We feel it deeply deplorable that the Taketomi Town ignored the residents for the process of drafting the Nature Guide Regulations Ordinance. The town has never opened the process to the residents, and

they announced the ordinance after it has passed through the town assembly.

Once Iriomote Island is registered as a World Heritage Site, the most important thing is to prevent environmental destruction caused by increased tourists. An organization to be the center for tourism management is inevitable and to perform inspection, investigation, and monitoring. However, no such organization has not been established yet and never will be made by next summer, when the decision on the World Heritage registration will be made. This situation will cause a blank period when there is no management organization after registration. Also, the participation of local communities is indispensable for such organizations, but many residents are discontent with the present ways of disclosing information from the local government office. I attached two articles contributed to a newspaper by residents in the Western Area in the end of this report. The live voices of the residents are shown in the article.

Again, the nature of the small island is built on a fragile and delicate balance. We anticipate that the registration to the World Heritage without solving the present and inconvenient issues would break the nature and people's lives on the island.

<Attached document #1>

An article “Voice” published 8th October (Tuesday) 2019 on Yaeyama Mainichi Newspaer.

Author: Miki Sugiyama (Working staff at the Iriomote Station, Tropical Biosphere Research Center, University of the Ryukyus)

Title: What will the World Natural Heritage bring to us?

Two years ago, the nomination of Iriomote Island, together with Yanbaru, Amami, and Tokunoshima were withdrawn by the Japanese government just before the final decision. How relieved it was for everyone! Many residents of Iriomote Island never wanted the nomination from the first. There were concerns for the increasing number of tourists, that would raise issues with insufficient infrastructure, deterioration of the environment, and security. However, Okinawa prefecture is now on the final straight track to the registration of the World Heritage. What has changed over the last two years? Over 700,000 visitors annually may come to the island of about 2,000 residents. Were the residents' anxieties raised in the previous nomination solved? Even today, there is too much garbage already reached the maximum capacity of disposal, people make long queues in front of the bathroom at the port every morning, lots of cars run much faster than the legal speed limit ... Nothing has changed from the last nomination; on the contrary, an increased number of tour agencies caused the flood of people at any rivers and waterfalls.

So what has changed since the last nomination? Taketomi town amended the Natural Environment Protection Ordinance and enacted the Tourist Guide Ordinance, but how do they work? They have increased the listed number of animal and plant species, and expect to protect them by law. However, what they did is just listed the species names in the law text. They do not care for the conservation of the habitats, and many of the habitats are under critical situations.

The Taketomi Town Tourist Guide Ordinance passed through the town

assembly unanimously on September 20. As many people already know, the ordinance is vague too much, and it was compiled without enough discussion with residents. Although there is a section titled "Residents' Responsibilities," the law was enacted while town people even didn't aware of the presence of the ordinances. I am pretty much wondering how this can happen.

If Iriomote Island in this present state is registered to World Heritage, then what is the World Heritage at all? Will Iriomote Island be a "World Heritage" without solving any concerns of the residents? There are no explanations about the expected changes in our life. We don't know what on earth is going on to our life. We are living on this island, and we are holding deep concern. For whom is the World Heritage? If World Heritage is a good thing for nature conservation, the present state of Iriomote Island is not enough for registration. What happens to this island if it is registered as it is?

I hope everyone who knows the precious nature of Iriomote Island that the island is under an outrageous process toward the registration to the World Heritage. I think what is needed now is a careful explanation to the residents, proper regulation, and conservation of habitats of rare animals and plants. World heritage is something that comes up after those. Everyone knows that once we lost nature, it will never return. We must keep it in mind. We have to remember how precious nature is. I don't know this small voice of a residence can reach how far, but I hope my voice would be transferred out from this island.

<Attached document #2>

An article "Voice" published 7th October (Monday) 2019 on Yaeyama Mainichi Newspaper.

Author: Yoichi Noda (A farmer living in Iriomote Island)

Title: "What we should think now"

Have you ever seen Iriomote Island on the world map? We, Iriomote residents, don't feel it small in our daily life, but it's indeed a tiny island. And on this little island, a wide variety of organisms have diversified and maintained the ecosystem on a delicate balance. I think it's a miracle.

However, we are about to destroy this delicate balance by our own hands. It is a well-known fact that tourists rush would do happen to the new spots listed to the UNESCO World Heritage List. And, the rise in tourists on this small island is an increase in the load to the environment. Too many tourists are nothing but a threat to the ecosystem. I thought that Taketomi town enacted a new ordinance to protect the island, but I found that the law looked without effectiveness. I wonder if Taketomi Town might want to take this opportunity to promote tourism.

I questioned Taketomi Town (* at the meeting to explain the ordinance to residents) if they can strengthen the regulations more strict. However, their answer was "Impossible," and even brought up the Freedom of Job Selection stated in the Japanese Constitution as well as the Antimonopoly Act as the reasons. If so, I'd like to ask a question again. Are there any laws at all to protect the precious ecosystem of Iriomote Island that is valuable at the World-Level? Also, are there no laws to protect the life of residents who long to live quietly on the island? Nowadays, personal rights are getting too large, and public welfare looks becoming an obsolete word. Well, even if I put aside our lives, it is clear that there are a lot of problems in the nomination, as you see in the article by Mr. Takayama pointed out (Yaeyama Mainichi Newspaper, September 22nd) and others.

So, I want to protest to UNESCO. Please do not include Iriomote Island to the World Heritage List by admitting the ordinances that are like empty promises as evidence of Protection and Management. If your mission is to protect, conserve, and transmit the outstanding value of nature to future generations, please inspect the legislative management plans with special care. Inclusion in the World Heritage List should only happen AFTER the local government has demonstrated that it has established a reliable environmental conservation system. I believe UNESCO has accumulated a lot of knowledge and knowhow through the World Heritage activity. I appreciate it so much if you would supervise Taketomi-town and help it to establish an effective management system.

In the end, I'd like to show my idea which may not be necessary for this article. We might be failing to receive something important from the predecessors who lived on this island. That is a mind of respect, appreciation, and fear that those who live relying on the islands every day should not forget. That is something we can not express by words or documents, but we should feel and transfer to the future. By keeping the mind, the predecessors took the island's nature as it was, paid attention to other organisms by accepting them as neighbors living on the same land, and lived a happy life even if there were no material wealth.

If we lose the mind by only paying attention to the immediate greed, there may be an empty island left behind that has lost its soul? I think Iriomote Island is at the crossroads now. I wish I would cooperate with people, and make it sure to transfer the rich nature and culture, as well as the "something important" but invisible on this island, to the next generation. Thank you.