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International Union for Conservation of Nature

Participants of the Ryukyu–Shima Summit

Letter of request concerning the proposed World Heritage Site “Amami–Ōshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, the northern part of Okinawa Island and Iriomote Island”

We, the participants of the ‘Ryukyu–Shima Summit (Ryukyu Island Summit)’ excursion, organized by the Nature Conservation Society of Japan in October, wish to express our concerns and ask the IUCN to consider undertaking additional steps to promote conservation in recommendation to the Japanese government in order to ensure the integrity of nature on the four island’s is maintained after their designation as World Natural Heritage sites.

The excursion participants were from Iriomote Island, Okinawa Island, and Amami–Oshima Island, areas which are nominated for World Natural Heritage registration, in addition to participants from Tokyo and the Kansai area. During the excursion we visited Amami–Oshima’s beautiful nature sites, as well as those which are experiencing nature conservation problems, whilst bringing together information from across various locations and exchanging our opinions.

As a result, we recognize that these candidate sites still have several challenges to be tackled before and after registration as World Natural Heritage sites. Therefore, we would like to request you to take into account the following items in the IUCN’s recommendation to the World Heritage Committee, especially in advice presented to the Japanese Government for future conservation.

1) Apply efficient measures to prevent over–use of vulnerable natural resources

Through taking part in this excursion, we were reminded once again of the vulnerability of the natural environment on the candidate islands for World Heritage registration. Registration as a World Natural Heritage site may lead to an increase in the number of tourists. Local authorities have already begun measures such as the establishment of rules for conducting Eco tours; however we believe that stronger measures for preventing the overuse of natural resources should be discussed.

The following measures should be addressed for reducing potential overuse of natural resources.

- (1) Investigate the predicted increase in tourist numbers and implement appropriate measures
- (2) Set guidelines, including limits to the number of visitors, for the sustainable use of natural resources
- (3) Carry out (2) in cooperation with local experts and residents
- (4) Revise (2) every five years with local citizen participation to hear their concerns and understand the current situation
- (5) Take concrete measures to prevent the introduction of alien species through the transportation of people and materials

2) Minimize the impact of military bases and drills, and implement appropriate measures

As military bases are located close to the proposed World Heritage areas, during the excursion we shared our concerns that there could be possible contamination by chemicals and red soil pollution from these bases and their drills.

These military bases and drills are located just next to the buffer zone of the World Heritage sites, in the nominated 'surrounding conservation areas'. The influence of noise from Osprey aircraft or military helicopters should be scientifically reviewed, and measures to minimize their impact should be taken.

3) Maintain correspondence with citizens after World Heritage registration

In comparison to the Ogasawara Islands, we believe that more efforts to engage local residents are needed. Although the proposal for the registration of the various islands was known, on each individual island local residents were not particularly involved in the decision-making process regarding registration and conservation as a World Natural Heritage site. In addition, what it means to be registered as a World Heritage site should be more widely recognized among locals, with many residents wishing to be a part of the effort for conservation and sustainable resource use. Raising awareness, environmental education and local involvement should also all be enhanced.

4) Recognizing the “surrounding conservation areas” and their role

In the current proposal, the “surrounding conservation areas” are established outside of the buffer zone. Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, the northern part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island all have “surrounding conservation areas”.

As a result of the excursion, we found that the large-scale development projects in the vicinity of the nominated World Heritage site and military training, drills and the like, may have an impact on the surrounding areas.

In order to enable the sustainable use of natural resources in the buffer zone, we believe that the role of the “surrounding conservation areas” should be clearly defined, recognized and play a key role in future conservation of these islands as World Natural Heritage sites.

We hope that the IUCN’s support and technical advice includes our above concerns, and can help the four proposed islands to become true World Natural Heritage sites.