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From Military Base to Conservation Site: Reimagining the Demilitarization of the Yambaru Forest in Okinawa

Sayaka Sakuma

Introduction

In early May of 2017, I joined a nature tour group to hike up to Mount Ibu in Kunigami Village, the northernmost village on Okinawa Island. The area called Yambaru is located approximately 100 kilometres from the capital city of Naha, where the dense forest remains despite rapid development on the island. The forest is increasingly branded as a destination for tourism, with several rare and endangered species inhabiting the area. The bright green leaves in the forest and the buzzing of cicadas indicated that summer was approaching, but the air in the woods was still much cooler than outside the forest. Our group – half a dozen curious visitors and nature guides who lived in Kunigami – walked up the trail to the chirping of birds.

The group was with an Okinawan-born guide who had moved to the village to raise his family in an area of abundant nature. As we continued hiking, he pointed out snakes, plants and old ruins that hinted at the complex ecology and human history of the Yambaru Forest. At one spot, he stopped and turned toward us to point to one of the trees. I expected he would point to a lizard or some other animal, but instead he pointed out letters that had been inscribed on the tree's trunk. Covered in green and white lichens, the faded letters in Japanese read: '*Amerika kaere, yama wo kaese*' ('Go home, America. Return the mountain'). The guide explained that the inscription on the tree dated from the time when villagers were protesting against the US military's construction of a live ammunition range on the mountain in 1970. Just like rare species crawling through the fallen leaves, the marks of military occupation are only legible to

those whose eyes are attuned to the significance of these subtle signs (see Figure 9.1).

By focusing on the spatial history of the Yambaru Forest, this chapter illustrates how different political, economic and ecological regimes express and materialize different meanings of the forest. When expanding our examination beyond the legal framework of occupation, the case of the Yambaru Forest shows that 'occupation' is not merely a legal status but a set of ongoing processes which makes meanings of a particular space.

Okinawa is a place in which many stories reveal the long-lasting impacts of colonialism, occupation, warfare and militarism. From annexation by Japan to the ongoing construction of US military bases, the stories of the Yambaru Forest suggest there is no clear mark of when occupation starts and when it might end. As the legal definition of occupation is a part of the Law of War (Benvenisti 2012), oversimplified use of the term can dismiss the complexity of lived experiences of occupation on the ground – as the editors of this volume note in the Introduction. By examining the spatial history of the Yambaru Forest, this chapter illustrates how multiple authorities and time periods have co-constructed Okinawa's landscape and its connection to multiple forms of occupation.

Okinawa is often described as 'peripheral' to Japan and the United States – the two states that persist in viewing Okinawa as instrumental to their respective security interests. Okinawa consists of over 100 inhabited and uninhabited islands, and its land area is only 0.6 per cent of Japan's entire national area. However, over 70 per cent of US military bases in Japan are located in Okinawa. Seeing Okinawa as 'peripheral' only fuels the security discourses in which 'passive' islands are subjugated and militarized. It is precisely through this discourse, being the periphery yet the keystone of the Pacific, that the United States and Japan can claim Okinawa's geopolitical utility.

This chapter draws on literature from the field of political geography, especially with regards the ways in which feminist geopolitics challenge the state's discursive and material construction of islands as peripheral while simultaneously assigning them with specific roles. In such a view, islands and archipelagos are 'powerful, recurring, and vexing to the spatial imaginary: highly unique, idiosyncratic, disparate and yet revealing, offering spatial form, pattern, and logics that are everywhere reproduced' (Mountz 2015: 638). Feminist geopolitics challenge the 'bird's-eye view' approaches of spatial arrangement and shift our attention to the scale of bodies to claim different realities on the ground. In such an approach, embodied experiences suggest different experiences of occupation.

Figure 9.1 Characters reading ‘Go home, America. Return the mountain’ inscribed on a tree trunk in the Yambaru Forest, May 2017. Photograph by the author.

Hau‘ofa (1993) challenges the ‘view-from-the-empire’ with his reconfiguration of the Pacific as ‘a sea of islands’ instead of ‘islands in a far sea’. This shift in perspective is important, as it challenges the colonial belief that islands are small, dependent and confined by water, thus needing to depend on powerful states. Instead, reframing islands as the centre requires seeing islands as a vast and rich

space connected through water – a point that is also made in Kris Alexanderson's chapter in this volume. Similarly, the Okinawan historian Hokama Shuzen (1986) calls for a reframing of Okinawa in a broader connection to the Pacific rather than as a region within Japan, as the Ryukyu Kingdom sought its expansion through trade with other countries and regions in east and Southeast Asia. Viewing islands as a 'sea of islands', this chapter provides a summary of how Okinawa has experienced different waves of political change across the centuries.

A brief history of Okinawa

The establishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom can be dated to 1429, when Shō Hashi took control of Okinawa Island. The kingdom relied heavily on trade as a key strategy, maintaining relations with Ming-dynasty China and Siam (now Thailand), as well as kingdoms in Malacca, Sumatra, Palembang, Java, Japan and Korea (Hokama 1986: 62). However, the expansion of European power in Southeast Asia and the establishment of direct trade between Japan and China in the sixteenth century put pressure on the Ryukyu Kingdom's trading strategy. In 1609, with the development of centralized feudalism in Japan and under difficult political as well as economic conditions, the Satsuma Domain in southern Kyushu Island undertook a military invasion of the Ryukyus (Hokama 1986: 76). The invasion by Satsuma led to the incorporation of the Ryukyu Kingdom as 'Ryukyu Domain' – a critical shift that registered Ryukyu as a part of Japanese territory. With the abolition of the feudal clan system in the country in the 1870s, over 200 years after the invasion, the Ryukyu Domain then became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. The time lag between the invasion and abolition of Ryukyu Domain, even amidst drastic modernization projects in the rest of Japan, was due to the goal of gradually adjusting the elite class in the Ryukyus to the new system of Japanese control.

Under Japanese control in the twentieth century, the prohibition of Okinawan languages represented part of the larger project of developing a Japanese national identity in Okinawa and paved an important path towards the Second World War. During that conflict, the Japanese government conscripted Okinawan students through schools for war labour. Okinawa was also the site of one of the bloodiest conflicts of that war – the Battle of Okinawa (March–June 1945). More than 200,000 people died in this battle, including 90,000 non-combatant residents of Okinawa, and 28,000 people who had been conscripted as military workers in Okinawa.

After Japan's surrender in 1945, the United States issued the Navy Military Government Proclamation (the 'Nimitz Proclamation') to announce the end of the Japanese Empire. The proclamation enabled the United States to take control of Okinawa and to expropriate land there for military bases, thus beginning twenty-seven years of US administration in Okinawa. While the rest of Japan regained its sovereignty in 1951, Okinawa remained under the control of United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR). This led to the disproportionate distribution of US military bases on the islands. While US military bases in Japan (excluding Okinawa) were reduced from 130,000 hectares to 30,000 hectares between 1952 and 1960, the size of the US military presence in Okinawa doubled with the relocation of the US Marines from Japan to Okinawa (Arasaki 2005: 20). The militarization of the islands led to the 'Reversion Movement' in the 1960s, with the hope to return the land used by the US military to Japanese control. Okinawa reverted to Japanese control on 15 May 1972. However, the issue of militarism remains to this day. The single term 'occupation' thus does not fully capture the impact of the multi-layered political influences that have been experienced in Okinawa. From the abolition of the Ryukyu Kingdom to ongoing militarism on lands that were expropriated in the aftermath of the Second World War, political changes in Okinawa have brought forth more than the mere demarcation of territorial boundaries.

The Yambaru Forest and the Battle of Okinawa

During the Battle of Okinawa, Yambaru served as a critical site for the evacuation of residents of Okinawa. In 1945, in preparation for American military landings on the island, Okinawan prefectural authorities designated Yambaru as a destination for the evacuation of 100,000 non-combatant residents from central and southern Okinawa. The prefectural government assigned Kunigami Village, the northernmost village, to accommodate 22,370 people from the southern part of the island. This was the largest number of evacuees assigned to any hosting village in Yambaru (Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education 2017). Villages in Yambaru were each assigned a specific number of evacuees and shelters, and were ordered to prepare food supplies for the evacuees.

However, these plans were disrupted after the US military began attacking Okinawa. On 1 April 1945, US troops landed on Toguchi Beach in Yomitan Village, 70 kilometres south of Kunigami Village, and divided the island between south and north. Escaping from approaching US troops, residents walked many

Figure 9.2 Map of Kunigami Village, showing its twenty communities. Map by the author.

days to reach Yambaru, from which they were pushed further into the mountains beyond the reach of US soldiers. Many testimonies of these residents reveal the varying forms of violence that they experienced while hiding in the forest. Slaughter by Japanese and US soldiers, brutal accounts of death from starvation, malaria and exhaustion, and various other traumatic experiences are all included in their stories. Some people continued to hide in the forest a few months after the war ended, while those who had been captured earlier went back into the woods in search of evacuees. US troops also conducted ‘mop-up operations’ through which soldiers walked through the forest to seek out hiding residents. While the public narratives of the Battle of Okinawa often focus on the brutal bloodshed in the south of the island, these other stories of survival deserve more attention and can be better understood through the history of the Yambaru Forest.

Forest as jungle warfare training centre

Under USCAR, the US military established Camp Gonsalves as the Northern Training Area in the Yambaru Forest in 1958. The forest was described as a ‘uniquely rugged’ and ‘forbidding’ jungle where 8,000 service officers trained

each year (Dawson 2000). The US military established the Northern Training Area as a counter-guerrilla centre to prepare US soldiers for warfare in Vietnam. The training centre included areas that simulated villages in the 'developing world', a missile launch site, and facilities imitating pharmaceutical factories (*Okinawa Times* 1998). The US military then renamed the facility the Jungle Warfare Training Center (JWTC) in 1998, a year before America's primary jungle warfare training centre in Panama, Fort Sherman, was closed down after forty-five years of operations. Although a US military spokesperson denied the existence of a replacement plan, the training features of the centre in Okinawa, as well as the need for such a training environment, were quite similar (Darling 1999). Since the training area has remained in operation long after the end of the Vietnam War (1955–75), the US military's ongoing operation in the Yambaru Forest suggests a fixation on the idea that land in Okinawa can provide strategic benefits well into the future.

The US naval magazine *All Hands* portrays the Yambaru Forest as a challenging jungle that can test the strength of soldiers with what is perhaps an overly dramatic depiction of the area:

The slippery red mud threatens to pull you down at every step. Vines reach out, and grab your arms and legs, no matter how careful you are. And the bugs – they bite and bite and bite. Don't even mention the snakes. But the worst thing of all, there's nothing you can do about it except suck it up, and keep putting one foot in front of the other. To most people it sounds like hell on earth, but for the handful of Navy Corpsmen and Marines assigned as instructors at the Marine Corps Jungle Warfare Training Center in northern Okinawa, this is home, and they love every minute of it.

Houlihan 2003: 1

This account reduces the forest ecology to vines, bugs and snakes that are indicative of the harsh obstacles and hazards soldiers face in a jungle environment. At the same time, the article extols soldiers who are able to embrace (and even love) such demanding conditions.

While the JWTC was established during the Cold War, its strategic utility today is ambiguous. Soldiers' references to the forest as a 'jungle' reflect the US military's geostrategic interest in the terrain and vegetation of Yambaru, where the dense subtropical forest provides a challenging terrain with steep hills and rivers. Although the US military embraces this physical environment, I argue that use of the term 'jungle' exoticizes the Yambaru Forest and sets it up as a dislocated space for survival training. From the US military's perspective, the

physical environment of the Yambaru Forest is a stand-in for harsh settings throughout the world. In other words, the forest is place-less in the US security consciousness, and the unique biophysical and ecological characteristics of the Yambaru Forest are dismissed. Operational plans and training maps erase endangered and endemic species as well as the sociocultural history of the forest. It is a jungle – any jungle – which is a proving ground for their boots and courage. With the placeless-ness of the Yambaru Forest, the JWTC serves as a space in which the material and discursive construction of military bodies that reinforces the geopolitical logics of security underpinning the expansion of the American military empire.

In discussing the training of servicemen in the United Kingdom, Woodward (1998: 293) argues that ‘becoming an infantryman requires new ways of being in space. It requires victory over the demands of the environment, its morphology and climate’. In fact, the narratives in video clips published by the US military indicate that the key mission of the JWTC is to transform American soldiers into capable bodies. I use the term ‘capable bodies’ to refer to the specific abilities that enlisted Americans embody as they are transformed from civilians into soldiers. Such abilities include the physical adjustment to navigate obstacles in the jungle. Promotional visuals published by the US military reveal a wide range of activities such as rappelling, patrolling, overcoming traps, conducting first aid treatment and vehicle interdiction using dogs. Among the series of training programmes provided at the JWTC, the Endurance Course, referred to as ‘E-course’, consists of about thirty obstacles providing Marines and other joint forces with an opportunity to experience the treacherous jungle. Soldiers often mentioned the ‘hasty rappel’, where they go down a nearly vertical cliff using a rope, and the ‘pit pond’ where the soldiers fully submerge themselves in a stagnant pond to go through traps set underwater. Smith believes his training at the JWTC was beneficial:¹

I believe it's a good training. It's what all Marines need to do as far as getting out to the field. Essentially, this is what America pays us for is to get out here, or in the jungle, in the desert, whatever the case may be. Executing our craft to the best of our capabilities. And the more we can get out here, to get to the field and learn things we do, face adversity, overcome it. It just makes us *a better all-around product*.

Jungle Communication Exercise 2018²

A critical transformation enacted by the JWTC is the disciplining of soldiers to evaluate their bodies as military instruments. The soldier here describes himself

as becoming 'a better all-around product'. In multiple videos, soldiers refer to their bodies as weaponry. They not only develop selves with technical survival skills but also endure physical pain, transforming themselves into capable fighting bodies when they complete the training. The harsh training throughout the day and night, and their ability to 'overcome' obstacles, leaves soldiers' bodies with physical scars. An article in *All Hands* asks readers to imagine receiving scars on their own bodies as marks of accomplishment, an indication of successful bodily transformation:

Though the rounds won't kill you, they are sure to leave a nice pink stain and a welt you don't forget. Few come out unscathed, but everyone leaves with a better understanding of what it's like to be under fire in a jungle environment . . . The final mile was made more difficult, as participants constructed a field litter out of battle dress uniform tops and tree branches to carry the heaviest person in their squad to the end of the course.

Houlihan 2003: 32

The US military's rhetoric on training in a jungle environment conceals the specific geographical setting of both the militarized land and actual battlefields of Okinawa. This indefiniteness enables soldiers to imagine future deployments without focusing on *where*, *when* and *why* they would be. An article from the military magazine *In the Army Now* captures one of the scenes at the JWTC in which the soldiers train in thick bush away from their homes and from 'battlefields':

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft! Suddenly, a stream of shots spews out from a bunker. 'Watch your left flank!' shouts a Marine from a thicket. Seconds later, a buddy screams out: 'I'm hit!' As the patrol starts to disintegrate into chaos, the unit commander orders his men to keep moving forward. 'Second team, where you at? C'mon, push it up.' Boom! Somebody snags a tripwire, triggering a hidden paint bomb. The group gets low marks, but there's always next time – in training camp, at least.

Dawson 2000

Catherine Lutz (2001) calls this notion of the military seeking to always be prepared for future warfare as 'the permanent state of war readiness'. The narrative of developing soldiers ready for war commonly appears at military training sites, where the military's masculinity receives glorification. The JWTC is also a site where the soldiers embody their readiness through the obstacles that they set up in the forest. Without recognizing the next deployment destination, the bizarre fascination with 'the jungle' supports the belief that such an environment can equip them to be prepared for anywhere. As one Marine says in a video:

About 80 per cent of the area we operate in, in any Pacific region is a jungle environment. The reason we need to be proficient at our jobs here is because at any time, we can be called upon to those areas to provide aid, security assistance. Whatever the case may be.

Hard Training Makes Hard Marines in the Grueling Okinawa Jungle 2016

Another soldier training at the JWTC comments:

It's massive. You're just looking at double canopy jungle, rolling hills, well not really rolling hills so much as you're going like this one minute, you get two seconds of flat ground and you're going back down the hill . . . It gave me a much better appreciation for the guys who took the island and other islands like it during WWII and everybody who served in Vietnam. I don't know how, especially in Vietnam, thirteen months tours in the jungle . . . I don't know how guys did that because I was there for eight days and I was destroyed.

Hard Training Makes Hard Marines in the Grueling Okinawa Jungle 2016

These narratives resemble each other in admiring the demanding physical environment that brings forth the masculine bodies of soldiers. The expressions of their preparedness for future deployment reflect the institution's claim for the legitimacy of securitization through the occupation of others' land in Asia and the Pacific. Exoticizing foreign lands, the US military re-imagines these lands as being full of dangers which only soldiers can handle.

Normalization and the provision of such training settings are part of the larger work that the US Department of Defense facilitates by mobilizing resources throughout its network of securitization across the world, such as Fort Sherman in Panama (closed in 1999), the JWTC in Okinawa and the Jungle Operations Training Course that the US Army has offered on O'ahu Island in Hawai'i since 2014 (Vergun 2017). In Okinawa, the counterpart in the 'hosting' country – the Japan Self-Defense Forces – also visits the JWTC to observe the training programme and to develop joint training sessions (*Japan Ground Self Defense Force Considers Marine Jungle Training* 2016), indicating the continuing expansion of the multilateral and collaborative militarization of Okinawa.

Protesting construction of a live ammunition training range

The history of the Yambaru Forest, however, is far more expansive than the narrow perspective of US military operations and security objectives. Okinawans

have long resisted US militarism on the ground. Scholars such as Bhowmik and Rabson (2016) suggest that Okinawa be viewed as 'islands of protest' because of residents' ongoing resistance to the US military presence. There is a long history of struggles against US militarization in Okinawa that challenges the dominance of the American military (Ahagon 1992; Akibayashi and Takazato 2009; Uehara 2009; Figal 2012; Davis 2015). Chibana (2018) demonstrates how people in Yomitan Village tend their agricultural land that is enclosed within a US military base, shedding light on how the act of farming becomes a form of everyday resistance. Even if such activities are not recognized as forms of political protest, recognizing such actions as resistance creates powerful counter-narratives about the politics of land used by the US military. Koopman (2011: 280) argues for 'alter-geopolitics' to name a 'more grounded and localized' form of challenging geopolitics, bringing forward practices held in spaces not commonly recognized as being political, such as streets, homes and jungles. In the case of Yambaru, the forest becomes the site of protest where residents' bodily actions challenge the US military's claims.

One major protest took place in Kunigami Village, literally in the 'backwoods', in the forest where residents had not noticed the secretive construction of military training batteries. On 22 December 1970, the mayor of Kunigami Village received notification from USCAR that US Marines would begin live ammunition training from 31 December that year at Mount Ibu, a 350-metre-high mountain located next to the Ada and Sosu Districts. While the news shocked village residents, the US military had already constructed the batteries by transferring construction materials and bulldozers by helicopter about ten months before the notification (Kunigami Village 2016; Mori 2015). Batteries for 105-millimetre howitzers had been set up to simulate the field artillery used by the US Army in Vietnam (McKenney 2007). On receiving the notification, the Kunigami Village Assembly convened an emergency meeting on 26 December 1970. In 1955, the assembly had previously requested the US military not to conduct training that included live ammunition. Following the discussions of 1955, members decided to directly confront the planned military training in the forest.

During an interview at his office in 2018, Kinjo³ recalled how he had walked through the thick forest to mobilize the residents in Sosu District, an area where the surrounding roadless forest makes it 'inaccessible land' (*riku no kotō*). On 31 December 1970, 600 residents and supporting citizens from outside Kunigami Village sat in at the training site. Some broke into the area that was blocked with barbed wire, directly confronting US soldiers at the ammunition launch site. Elementary and middle school students from the districts of Ada, Aha and Sosu,

where the potential hazard of fire and bomb impact was prominent, also joined the protest. Those who entered the area where the live ammunition was targeted to fire made smoke and waved flags to warn US soldiers of their presence in the targeted zone. Kinjo described the intense interactions between himself and a US interpreter, as he held a transceiver and waited to give a cue to the people standing by:

Would the military break their promise and sacrifice residents? I would not tolerate that. So I said 'I will never step back until the military completely leaves the site. I am ready to die for this, and I will do anything I can do, so watch me.' Then I told the others, 'Charge!' (*totsugeki!*).

Interview, 16 January 2018

Kinjo depicted the crowd climbing up the steep slope where the soldiers had placed sandbags and pulling on the legs of soldiers. The confrontation continued for over an hour, with approximately 200 residents gathering at the launch site and between thirty and fifty US military personnel there also, the military finally leaving the site at around 11.15 am. One person broke his ribs and others sustained minor injuries, but there were no casualties. The US military abandoned the training site, meaning the villagers' protest had been successful.

The history of this protest is now commemorated quietly with a plaque and an engraved stone erected at the entrance of the trail to Mount Ibu. Yet the conflict between residents and the US military around the Yambaru Forest continues, with the construction of a pad for the Harrier military aircraft completed in 1987, the construction of a helicopter pad in Takae in 2016, and the ongoing reclamation of Ōura Bay at Henoko. The tree trunk upon which the words reading 'Go home, America. Return the mountain' were inscribed remains relevant to this day – more than seventy years after the first landing of US troops on the island. The writing remains as a reminder that the declaration of the end of the Second World War, and the US occupation of Okinawa, only defines the occupation in the context of international politics, while the impact of war and militarization continues to shape the landscape of the Yambaru Forest.

From military base to conservation site

A unique characteristic of the spatial history of occupation in Yambaru is that the forest continually adapts as a space animated by an evolving ecology. Unlike the military bases in the other parts of the islands enclosed by barbed wired, the

JWTC is open to the changing environment of the forest. The nexus between non-human species, militarism and conservation thus emerges as a unique form of spatial arrangement within the Yambaru Forest.

Although the origin of the description is not clear, government organizations and tour companies often refer to the forest area as the 'Oriental Galapagos' – a branding strategy that signifies the exceptional biological diversity of the forest, referencing Ecuador's Galápagos Islands, famous for their concentration of rare species. The name 'Oriental Galapagos' evokes the notion of a 'discovery' of new spaces and species by those whose scientific gaze gives validation to not only the ecological but also the economic value of the forest. The Ministry of the Environment's Yambaru Wildlife Conservation Center, located in Kunigami Village, emphasizes the location, climate and topographic formation of Yambaru as contributing to the concentration of rare species; situated in the path of typhoons and the Kuroshio Current, the forest receives more than 2,000 millimetres of precipitation per year (Government of Japan 2019). According to the Yambaru Wildlife Conservation Center (2010), roughly ten mammal, 2,000 insect, 1,000 plant and 110 bird species inhabit the Yambaru Forest. Approximately 80 per cent of the fourteen amphibian and eighteen reptile species found in Yambaru are endemic to the forest.

Following the reversion of Okinawa to Japanese rule in 1972, the forest was newly opened for Japanese scientific discoveries and there was a boom in recognition of natural species there. The 'discoveries' of the Okinawa rail (*Yambaru kuina*) in 1981 and the Yambaru long-armed scarab beetle (*Yambaru tenaga kogane*) in 1983 led to national publicity for Yambaru as having 'birds that do not fly' and 'Japan's largest beetle species'. National recognition of the rare species that thrive in Yambaru coincided with the state's emphasis on biodiversity in conservation politics during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Following the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Japan established its Biodiversity National Strategy in 1995 with the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries implementing laws and initiatives to categorize and protect biodiversity in Japan. The most famous bird species in Yambaru include the Okinawa rail, the Okinawa woodpecker (*noguchigera*) and the Ryukyu robin (*hontō akahige*). The first two species, the Okinawa rail and Okinawa woodpecker, are endemic to Yambaru (Yambaru Wildlife Conservation Center 2018). As of 2012, the Japanese government had registered sixteen species from the Yambaru Forest using the conservation designation of 'natural treasure' (Minato 2012).

While a focus on non-human species in the forest appears to be apolitical, the history of conservation politics in Yambaru is inseparable from US-Japan

security negotiations. In 1996, amidst a surge in island-wide protests following the rape of a schoolgirl in Okinawa by US servicemen, the Special Action Committee on Facilities and Areas in Okinawa produced a plan to return 3,987 hectares (out of 7,543 hectares) of the US military-occupied Northern Training Area in the Yambaru Forest (Ministry of Defense 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1996). In 2003, the Japanese government publicized its intention to nominate the forest as a World Natural Heritage Site. In 2013, the state formed a scientific committee to define the ecological value of the area. The forest was officially designated as Japan's thirty-third national park in 2016. This designation placed a limit on logging and other development activities, and was a prerequisite for the forest's nomination to the International Council on Monuments and Sites that decides on World Heritage status.

Kunigami Village's environmental education centre – the Yambaru Discovery Forest – is an example of the transition of land from military use to wildlife preserve. The United States returned the former Aha Training Range to Japan on 22 December 1998, releasing 525 hectares of land that included several sites registered as natural monuments for rare plant species. Since 2007, a non-profit organization, the Kunigami Tourism Association, has provided various outdoor programmes such as camping and hiking in the area.

In an interview at the Yambaru Discovery Forest facility, which is surrounded by dense woods, a nature tour guide called Oshiro described how US forces used the area for their training:

The US military leaves Marine soldiers with their bags filled with food. It's survival training, so they are left in the forest for a week or so. It's not like they damage the forest, unlike Kin town and Ginoza where they have live ammunition training. The training is just to endure in the forest, so the forest is not harmed. There are still some areas where US forces' helicopters land sometimes. Occasionally, Ospreys [MV-22 aircraft] land. When they fly, although they rarely land in the forest, you can tell the mark of their landing right away. Their engines are facing this way [pointing vertically] but the engines face up and inject heat when they descend, which leaves the area burnt.

Interview, 9 February 2018

As we walked, the guide pointed out the remaining dug-outs in which soldiers were said to have hidden during the training. He then moved on to describing trees, insects, soil and rare species in the forest. He crafted his explanations with quizzes, narratives and photographs to help visitors interpret the landscape and stimulate their imagination. However, the political history of conflict in and over

the land was not mentioned, other than acknowledging that the land was formerly used for US military training.

The nature guide's description highlights the intriguing emergence of nature tourism on what was formerly military land. While he acknowledges the historical use of the forest as a training site, the programmes at the Discovery Forest do not cater to touring either a military site or a 'dark tourism' site. This is significant, because dark tourism, which is defined as visits to sites of 'genocide, holocaust, assassination, crime or incarceration that have served to attract visitors' (Lennon and Foley 2000: 2), is common in other former battle sites on the island. Instead of drawing attention to the forest as a political instrument or a site of past deaths, the tour guide focuses on re-centring visitors' awareness of the forest landscape and its ecological value. This approach is intriguing because it points out two major issues in tourism representation of the Yambaru Forest. First, such an approach rejects the co-optation of war and militarization as the image of Okinawa, suggesting an alternative geopolitical imaginary of Okinawa beyond that of militarized islands. Second, it indicates the US military's ability to blend the social, political and even ecological environment despite extremely different functions of each in the surrounding space. I would argue that these two dynamics are not as contradictory as they may seem, because the elimination of an open military presence in the everyday landscape can achieve both. David Havlick (2018: 9) calls out such forms of overlapping geographies of militarization as 'the ubiquity of militarization', in which militarized landscapes can be familiar yet concealed, so that we do not recognize our surrounding space as militarized. The emergence of nature tourism in what was formerly (and still is currently) militarized land in Yambaru exemplifies such hidden, ubiquitous effects. Havlick (2007: 154) argues that the conversion of military land to wildlife conservation sites is often presented as a 'win-win' situation in which 'nearly all the parties orchestrating or examining such conversions at some point describe them as both good for local economies and good for the environment'. Furthermore, Havlick examines how maintaining biodiversity as the core land value often sidesteps the question of contamination, since conservation land use, unlike commercial development, does not require a thorough environmental assessment for military-induced environmental issues, but leaves the landscape as it is (Havlick 2007).

Protecting biodiversity as a driver for military-to-wildlife conversion can obscure ecological costs and other socio-cultural, economic and political costs incurred by the military use of the land (Gaynor et al. 2016; Havlick 2007). Laurel Mei-Singh (2016) points out how the transition from military land to

conservation at Ka'ena point in Hawai'i brought forth carceral conservationism: the fencing of ex-military land; the imposition of capitalist land control; the removal of Indigenous land practices; and the construction of a tourism destination. Repurposing militarized land to land that is to be conserved shows the powerful congruence of militarism and conservation.

Contested paths towards UNESCO World Heritage site status

The Japanese Ministry of the Environment announced its plan to nominate the Yambaru Forest as part of Japan's fifth UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site: the 'Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, Northern Part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island'. Various campaigns have since been put forward to promote the area as a potential UNESCO World Heritage site while developing conservation projects such as the eradication of invasive species. With the Ministry of the Environment promoting the idea that designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site would provide a powerful branding tool for declining rural communities, the ecological value of the forest is closely connected to its economic value through developing ecotourism opportunities. The Ministry of the Environment launched an office in Kunigami Village to educate visitors about the area's rare species, while also conducting various programmes for surveying and conserving rare species such as the Okinawa rail.

However, while efforts to designate the forest as a UNESCO World Heritage site continue, the presence of the Northern Training Area and the militarization on Takae and Henoko have emerged as friction points for this biodiversity hotspot. Two members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) conducted site visits to all the nominated islands in October 2017. During their visit to Yambaru, several English-language banners appeared around the nominated forest and a group of people waited for the IUCN representatives to arrive to protest the continued presence of the US military in the area (see Figure 9.3). The process of heritage designation emphasized iconic species, yet the presence of the US military in the area had not been addressed by the state government. A group of representatives from the Ramsar Network in Japan published a request for the IUCN committee to include part of the Northern Training Area in the World Heritage site and examine the impact of the military base being constructed at Ōura Bay in Henoko (Ramsar Network Japan 2017).

Figure 9.3 A banner protesting against the US military base in the Yambaru Forest, 2018. Photograph by the author.

In May 2018, the IUCN's decision to defer examination of the islands for World Heritage status shocked some stakeholders who had expected to launch glorious media coverage of the confirmation of such status. The IUCN concluded that Yambaru's "wholeness" will not be fully satisfactory without the inclusion of the areas of greatest significance within the returned Northern Training Area on Okinawa' (IUCN 2018: 43) and suggested waiting for the government of Japan to incorporate the returned land into the national park. Furthermore, the request to consider ongoing militarization projects was declined because they were 'distanced from the nominated property'. Speaking to concerns about the introduction of invasive alien species through construction projects in which materials that could contain invasive species would be used, the IUCN proposed 'as a separate matter to the World Heritage nomination' to provide technical guidance if requested by the government of Japan (IUCN 2018: 46). The remaining training range was further described as following:

For the time being, the remaining NTA [Northern Training Area] remains under US control but acts as an important *de facto* buffer zone to the nominated property, contributing to landscape connectivity and also supporting important

habitats for key species. The IUCN mission confirms in general terms the great apparent significance of these areas, but it is notable that at the time of the mission these areas were not accessible and so were not visited – thus IUCN cannot fully evaluate them at the present time.

IUCN 2018: 43

The IUCN's decision was that the military land covered a crucial zone that contributed to 'landscape connectivity' and 'important habitats for key species'. However, due to a lack of access because of the US military, the advisory board was not able to evaluate its full account. The statement further indicates how this international conservation organization adopted a passive attitude to the on-going militarization.

Furthermore, the contestation over the transition from military base to biodiversity sanctuary suggests the lack of villagers' perspectives on the state-led campaigns of land transition. One prominent nature photographer ('Kudaka') in the village holds a critical view towards the missing link between ordinary life on the ground and the biodiversity campaign:

People just claim the forest as 'the wonderful forest where Okinawa rail live' and 'the rich forest', but that doesn't help to tell the reality of the forest. Many people didn't even care to know what the forest is really about, and that's where I question the environmental education in Japan that tells 'the place is important because it is a special place' or 'this place is precious because this place is different from other places'. The question is, for whom is it special? For the communities where such 'special places' locate, it is just a normal landscape. There is nothing special about it. People in Kunigami don't see Mount Yonaha as special. Many people may say the Okinawa rail is special, but do you think they honestly think so? Same goes for Pryer's woodpecker. People think the bird is an important species because there are not many of them and many people have never seen them. But for us, they're not at all special. They are ordinary species. It is just that there are people who want to see them as special. You must think about what's behind such a view. Most projects are about money, because their businesses get easier if they emphasize how special those species are. For the government, seeing species as special makes it easier for them to implement projects. Yet do those people really hold a consciousness to conserve the species that they claim to be special? No. They only see the species as a resource that benefits their projects. They do not think protecting the species is actually their job, so they don't utilize their profit for conservation. In their views, conservation is someone else's job. That's the biggest issue. You can brand the species, you can use the species for your business, but if you use them as resources, do work on conservation. That's obvious if you have that as the core of your livelihood, but

even the government does not do that. I have never heard anyone explaining the reason why exactly this place must become a world heritage site.

Interview, 30 November 2018

As someone who ‘grew up in the forest’ and who was long committed to promoting conservation of the forest, the comments of this photographer depicts the accumulated frustration towards the exclusion of the local population. Despite meeting with numerous consultants, researchers and government officials who came and left Yambaru, he felt that they failed to answer the central question: ‘Why should this place become a world heritage site?’ The photographer talked with deep frustration and emotion, and worried about the objectification of the forest he loves.

Conclusion

The Japanese government portrays the relocation of US military bases in Okinawa as ‘lifting the burden.’ However, since the total concentration of the US military on the islands has hardly decreased, the burden has not been lifted but rather shifted to harm other lives and ecologies. While both the Japanese government and the United States celebrated the return of the forest land, the ongoing militarization of Okinawa underscores that we need to carefully consider the relationship between occupation, militarism and conservationism. We not only need to consider the lingering impacts of occupation but also to ask what *demilitarizing* the islands might mean for different people and different interest groups.

This chapter has illustrated how the political history of Okinawa has influenced the construction of values around the Yambaru Forest, be those political, ecological or economic. In examining how the United States and Japan interpret the forest, we can determine overlapping interests that seek to assert control over the land. In exploring how the returned land is claimed, the question arises as to who has the ability to define land use after militarization. The transition of land in Yambaru sheds lights on the legacy of exclusion – the exclusion of residents and local history – in the dominant narratives of the forest. What this chapter highlights are the different forms of legitimacy for claiming control over this land on the part of both the US military and Japan. The US military’s security discourse legitimizes the presence for US troops and the continued use of expropriated land, while biodiversity conservation creates room for launching conservation efforts without addressing militarism.

The spatial history of occupation in the Yambaru Forest thus challenges us to engage with the seemingly apolitical space of the forest as a focus of the political contestation over land management. Doing so requires us to re-centre our focus on Yambaru, with its history of evacuation, militarism and ongoing protests against militarization. These are faded memories in a public narrative that now depicts the forest as a jungle warfare training centre, a space for diversity, or a potential World Heritage site.⁴ Seeing the forest as political, we need to engage with the question of how to commemorate the history of the forest without further excluding people on the ground. Just as hikers walk through the fallen leaves in the forest, patiently searching for signs of animal and insect life, so the forest landscape holds rich stories of occupation and resistance that are waiting to be uncovered.

Notes

- 1 All soldiers appearing in the clips are cited in this chapter with pseudonyms.
- 2 Emphasis added by the author.
- 3 This is a pseudonym.
- 4 At the time of writing, a decision on World Heritage site status has been suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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