

Iriomote & Tsushima

THE END OF THE WILD CATS OF JAPAN

Japan's Unholy Worship of Big Business Wins Again

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T he wild cats of Iriomote Island

have never inhabited the Iriomote National Park, a mountainous reserve designated in their favor in 1972. Maybe this has begun to change. The bulldozers have plowed up the coastal zone, pushed the forested hills into ravines and swamps, cleared the debris. Big industry planted pineapples and sugar cane. Big tourism planted resorts. As their natural habitat disappears, the rare Iriomote Wild Cats are being forced to adapt or die. Some may have fled to the mountainous interior, to Iriomote National Park.

It is an unfortunate experiment in behavioral adaptation, and the most traveled road to extinction.

Iriomote is the “Galapagos of the Orient,” the southernmost island in Japan’s *Nansei Shoto* archipelago, islands with 600 year-old blue coral colonies, ancient broad-leaf and mangrove forests, endemic hares, woodcocks, robins and wildcats. While the fighting on islands like Okinawa subsided long ago, the biodiversity of this sub-tropical paradise has been under attack: This is the “Hawaii” of Japan.

The Western image of Japanese culture as philosophically and harmoniously attuned to nature is erroneous. Japanese culture—the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the local consumption and waste patterns, the rapacious timber industry, plantation and aquaculture industries which spread like cancer throughout Asia—is no different than American culture: use as much as there is, buy more, don’t worry about the waste, chuck it in a hole: out of sight, out of mind. *Honto ni?*

As throughout Japan, unrestricted development is decimating the *Nansei Shoto* island groups with deforestation, erosion and siltation, pollution of rivers and suffocation of corals. Golf courses threaten the endangered species of Amami Island. Plans for mass tourism in the 1990's called for an airport runway to be extended over Ishigaki's Shiraho reef, identified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as "the most diverse reef ecosystem in Japan."

While the Tsushima island leopard cat and Iriomote *yamanecko* were both designated as National Monuments by 1972, these wild cats are severely threatened: the Governments concern amounts to little more than lip service. Disease and hybridization from growing feral cat populations, competition from introduced and native animals, and predation by dogs are all contributing to their decline. More critical is habitat destruction due to development.

In the late 1990's the scientific community determined that the Iriomote Wild Cats are facing an even greater threat with the discovery of a feline form of the AIDS virus in one of the island's cats. Researchers at the University of the Ryukyus and the University of Kagoshima, who have conducted joint research on the cats since 1995, discovered a feline infected with the FIV virus among cats living near a garbage dump on the island. Researchers concluded that the number of Iriomote Wild Cats living near and feeding from the garbage dump is on the increase, and are concerned those cats will infect others unless steps are taken to prevent the spread of the potentially fatal virus.

Why are the Wild Cats feeding on garbage dumps? Disappearing local prey species, decimated habitat, disruptions in their environment, and ecological unraveling of the ecosystem. In 2001 the Japanese government began documenting the latest threat to the Iriomote cats: the invasion of Iriomotejima Island by poisonous marine toads.

The more northerly Tsushima Island (710 sq. km) Wild Cat is in the greatest danger. With a population of less than 70 individuals (1994), the rapid expansion of the islands' 49,000 plus inhabitants, the lack of a protected area and the cat's status as a sub-species of the leopard cats of southeast Asia have left the Tsushima Cats on the short list of earth's inhabitants.

The 40-70 Iriomote Wild Cats are an endemic species on Japan's southernmost Iriomote Island, 293 square kilometers retaining much of the ancient natural and cultural heritage. The sub-tropical environment draws thousands of tourists each year for the adventure of Japan's "last frontier." They come for fantastic diving: The corals of the reef are like paint spilled in a popsicle-blue sea. Myriad fish school and dart in and out. Sharks and rays swim the channels of the marine park. They come for river journeys through mangrove forests and hikes to waterfalls of the interior, a jungle-scape of ancient twisted trees; vines coiled like snakes and snakes coiled like vines.

Preferring the coastal belt of forests, foothills and mangrove swamps, the Iriomote Wild Cats forage with a seasonal dependency on reptiles, birds and fish. Studies of ranging and feeding patterns funded by World Wildlife Fund Japan have verified that the coastal zones excluded from the National Park comprise their habitat. Studies of behavioral ecology, diet and threats to survival have documented their susceptibility. Lacking however, are any form of inter-disciplinary studies considering alternative strategies for cultural and natural resource preservation and utilization. But these studies would now be meaningless: big business moved forward with its plans.

"The Iriomote Wild Cat is not endangered due to tourism but rather from agricultural development." Kiichi Mimura told me. Mimura was the Assistant Director for Wildlife Protection at Japan's Environment Agency in the 1990's. "Pineapples and sugar cane are strong in the Japanese

economy. Okinawa and Hokkaido have a special agency to make fields, airports and roads, since these areas are considered underdeveloped. But these areas have special species.”

Studies of coastal zone caves have recently brought several of these special species into the limelight. Others may disappear prior to discovery. In 1993, one Japanese scientist stepped forward to speak on behalf of the bats, a step which sent at least one concerned politician to Iriomote on a fact-finding mission of her own. But the environmental consciousness may be far too little, far too late.

Development of the Nansei Shoto region mirrors Japan’s Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) programs across South East Asia: plunder, pillage, starve and profit. Social and environmental impact assessments, if performed at all, are those of vested interests, and are universally closed to the public. Kickbacks and coercion are standard procedure. When big business moves in, management and infrastructure move in with it, closing out benefits to local societies, radically altering natural environments.

“Japanese big business and trading companies have long-time relations [overseas],” Yoichi Kuroda once told me. Kuroda is the author of the WWF International and IUCN funded study, Timber From The South Seas: An Analysis of Japan’s Tropical Timber Trade (1989). “Personally, financially and technically. They never have sensitivity to the environment—everything is from the point of view or efficiency and cost-effectiveness. And illegal practices are rampant.”¹

Protesting a massive agricultural pesticide AID package destined to Cambodia for instance, a package denounced by the Food and Agriculture Agency (FAO) of the United Nations, the over 10,000 member Japan Consumer’s Union stated: “As in most overseas development assistance (ODA) projects, information has been withheld, feasibility studies are inadequate, and projects ignore the realities ... they only exist to secure overseas markets for Japanese enterprises.”

Japan’s commitment to domestic conservation is best exemplified by the “Special Resort Law”, pushed through the Japanese Diet one day in 1988. Under this law a large percentage of the total land mass is exempt from environmental regulations, opening even national parks for development.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg,” said Jane Davenport, former International Affairs Assistant to Japanese Diet member and environmentalist Akiko Domoto. “When environmental conservation impinges directly on human harm, they [government] are concerned. This is domestic concern only, and it’s concern only for Japanese humans, not wildlife or the environment.”

Perhaps the greatest problem of all is the compromise of the very environmental groups who are charged by the public trust with protecting the earth. In the 1990’s the World Wildlife Fund Japan compromised endangered species protection by shutting down the Japanese arm of TRAFFIC, the international agency charged with monitoring and controlling the trade in endangered species. The reasons were clear: it was impinging on business profits and embarrassing the officials and corporations involved. In the process of investigating the closure of TRAFFIC it became clear that WWF-Japan had become nothing more than the smokescreen of conservation concern and propaganda for the big business community in Japan.

Indeed, officials from the most powerful and devastating corporations—and the Japanese trading conglomerates themselves, the *sogo shosa*—were on the board of WWF-Japan in the mid-1990’s.

¹ See: keith harmon snow, “Samurais, Sawdust and Shame: Japan and the Tropical Timber Trade”, Japan International Journal, <http://www.allthingspass.com/uploads/html-20Samurais.htm>

Companies like Sumitomo, Mitsubishi, C. Itoh, Toyota and Marubeni—the corporations that Swiss activist Bruno Manser challenged, in partnership with grass-roots environmental organizations in Japan, for the genocide against the indigenous Penan people of Sarawak, Malaysia. Of thirty-three WWF-Japan trustees, 20 were from industry, officers of the Keidanren, Nikkeiren, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Tokyo Electric Power, Sony, Toyota—and among the most powerful men in Japan. Men like Hyosuke Kujiraoka, a member of Japan’s House of Representatives, who secured votes from Tokyo’s Katsushika fur-industry Ward by consulting for the Japan Fur Association. Men like Teruzo Yoshina, CEO of Shimizu Construction, formerly instrumental in WWF decision-making, who was arrested in September, 1993, for his part in the Ibarakiken construction industry scandals. And men like Kazuhiro Tashiro, former Director of the Ueno Zoological Gardens, long-time friend of Takashi Aritake—the man behind the golden lion tamarin scandal (that rocked the international endangered species community in the 1990’s).

The rise of corporate involvement and the demise of environmental protection reached new heights by the mid-1990’s: the directors of WWF-Japan were the leaders of the very same companies responsible for criminal activities in the logging, mining, agro-business, nuclear and chemical industries.² The entire enterprise—environmental conservation—was compromised. Most of these companies also play a major role in deforestation of South East Asia, and have moved on from the clear-cut landscapes in Asia to the forests of Congo and South America; they have also been involved in clear-cutting the old growth forests of Canada and the U.S. The most significant steps they have taken toward environmental protection and sustainability are to produce massive PR campaigns whitewashing their activities and misleading the public. The International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and certain United Nations bodies (UNESCO) have also been complicit in the ongoing environmental devastation. Japanese power companies are involved in the bureaucratically and environmentally and socially hostile enterprise of expanding nuclear power and spreading radiation—and this proceeds with million dollar budgets behind some of the most dishonest propaganda campaigns.

Has anything changed since the mid-1990’s? Hardly.

According to the Sarawak Campaign Committee in Japan: “It is the same “dirty dozen” *sogo shosha* importing all the wood from Sarawak, from national parks in Indonesia, and other places.” The board of directors of WWF-Japan continues to be compromised by big business interests who gain credibility from their WWF association and status. Directors include Koichi Ikeda, Chairman of Asahi Beer; Yotaro Kobayashi, Chairman of Fuji-Xerox and member of the Trilateral Commission; Hajime Sasaki, Chairman of NEC (benefits from coltan from Congo); Shoichiro Toyota, Honorary Chairman, Toyota Motors; Junji Narita, CEO, Hakuho-do (Ad Agency); Motokazu Hashimoto, Chairman, NHK (Public Broadcasting); Hisashi Hie, Chairman, Fuji Television; Takeshi Fukuzawa, Mitsubishi; Minoru Makihara, Advisor to the Board, Mitsubishi Corporation.

The scale of global environmental devastation caused by Japanese industry and culture far outweighs the meager efforts—and massive propaganda—to contain or mitigate it. Tsunenari Tokugawa, director of the powerful Japanese NYK global shipping company is today a director of WWF International and senior director of WWF-Japan. Sumitomo Industries has 792 subsidiaries or associated companies around the world. WWF International and their national affiliates are all involved in the euphemistic Congo Basin Forest Partnership, a program connected to the U.S.

² See: <http://www.allthingspass.com/journalism.php?catid=12>

Pentagon and major extractive industries, which is billed as an environmental win-win for Africa and the rest of the world. Entities involved with the CBFP include the Government of Japan and the American Forest and Paper Association. Of course, the International Tropical Timber Organization—ostensibly designed to restrict and control environmental devastation and corruption in the logging sector—is also behind it. And while the genocide against the indigenous Penan people continues in Sarawak Malaysia—Penan protests in 2006 and 2007 to blockade illegal logging have been met with paramilitary retaliation—the international conservation and environment community remains completely silent.³ Indeed, almost no one cares. Japanese agribusiness has spread over Southeast Asia devastating natural habitats everywhere with monoculture, pesticidal plantations. What does this say about the future of a few elusive little cats living in the shadows of a tourist *mecca*?

In 2003 the Bulletin of the Faculty of Agriculture, Kagoshima University, published a report indicating that the threats to the wild cats—especially the Tshushima Wild Cat—are more serious than ever. By, 2006 the biggest threats to the wild cats and other ecological wonders of the island were centered on ecotourism: the specter of wild nature and tropical seas drawing hundreds of thousands of people annually. Hotels have overload sewage and electricity capacity, surging traffic threatens cats crossing roads, scuba divers pressure once untouched reefs, and the wakes of tour boats are eroding the roots of mangroves in ecologically fragile mangrove swamps.

“We think it’s having an impact, and it’s probably bad,” said Maki Okamura, a scientist at the Iriomote Wildlife Conservation Center who is working to save the 100 remaining Iriomote cats, one of the world’s most endangered felines. Okamura was commenting to the Associated Press, and the use of the word “probably” is rather an understatement. Tourism reportedly jumped 14-fold from 1975 to about 700,000 people a year by 2004. The first resort hotel opened in 2004, and it divided Iriomote’s 2,200 permanent islanders, those in favor of unregulated corporate sprawl, and those in favor of environmental and social happiness. Big business won. It always does.

The Environment Agency—which holds little ground against the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MITI)—promoted the expansion of Iriomote National Park (currently about 80% of the island) to include the coastal habitat of the wildcat. Typical of historical land-use planning based on an exclusionary model of protected area management however, the Agency sought displacement of the Iriomote islanders, a solution even they admit to be prohibitively expensive. In the end they just built the resorts.

Most of Iriomote’s 1500 or so people have heard enough about the endangered *yamanekos*, nocturnal cats who rudder with tails through mangrove swamps, hunt along fields and highways, steal chickens from farmyards-

“The people don’t give a damn about the cat,” Maggie Suzuki told me. Suzuki was an American environmentalist living in Japan. “Most of them are sick of conservationists. They have bills to pay. They don’t want to have to start from scratch somewhere else because of these cats.”

Calling for their share of the economic prosperity of mainland Japan, islanders also developed a sweet tooth for pineapples and sugar cane. While they also welcome the economic benefits of tourism, a study by the IUCN (1990) on the effects of tourism on other *Nansei Shoto* islands, particularly nearby *Ishigaki*, determined that local facilities cannot compete with major conglomerates targeting the area, corporations with unlimited financial resources, impervious to the

³ See: Bruno Manser Fonds, <www.bmf.ch> and <<http://www.allthingspass.com/journalism.php?catid=39>>.

fragility of the natural. And so it came to be. Eco-tourism and cottage industries are now as meaningless as the wildcats dying in increasing numbers from increasing traffic.

With current population estimates of 40 to 80 Iriomote wild cats the destruction of coastal habitat has devastated an already devastated gene pool. Geographic isolation and the decline in numbers are creating a shortage of genetically distinct mating partners. As with the cheetah and the Florida panther, the Iriomote Wild Cats will ultimately suffer from inbreeding, leading to reproductive and developmental impairment, and increasing susceptibility to disease. In the Asiatic lions of Gir, India, a sampling of the population revealed spermatozonal abnormalities of 79% in males (abnormalities of 30% render a dog or a bull infertile). An epidemic of the scale currently affecting the lions of the Serengeti would wipe out the Iriomote cats. No matter how you look at it, extinction is just a matter of time.

“The [Iriomote] cats are so rare,” said David Wildt, cat specialist of the IUCN Felid Taxon Advisory Group, “that very few people have actually seen them. We recommended against a Species Survival [captive breeding] Program, since the odds are that any two of these cats are already related.”

For Susumu Murata, Iriomote Wild Cat watcher for 22 years, the wildcats are fascinating members of a rich and varied biotic community. “Tourism does not have to be destructive,” he pointed out. “There are many things which could boost prosperity on Iriomote without damaging the environment. But this cat is in deep trouble.”

During the period between February 1994 and July 2003, the corpses of 29 Iriomote wild cats and 36 Tsushima wildcats were preserved in the Wildlife Conservation Center of the Environmental Agency of Japan. Causes of death in Iriomote wildcats were 20 road kills, two trapped in *torabasami* (boar traps), one bite wound and six deaths from unaccountable causes, while in Tsushima wildcats there were 22 road kills, four deaths from weakness, two trapped in *torabasami*, three bite wounds and five deaths from unaccountable causes. And these are only the corpses that were found—these shy little cats aren’t known for walking into town to announce their imminent demise.

The tragedy of another lost species notwithstanding, the relevance of extinction relates to “trophic cascading”, where a disturbance to an intricately established ecosystem ripples through the biosphere. Also dying off here is the population of lizards—the skinks—forming the bulk of the wild cats diet in certain seasons. This in turn will affect the of the population of certain insects responsible for the balance of agricultural pests, prompting the increased use of pesticides, thus killing off other birds and fish, etc., etc., etc. It’s already begun. The “Galapagos of the Orient” is following the example of the “Galapagos of the United States”—you know, that little group of islands in the Pacific Ocean that were stolen from the *Hawai’ian* people, without compensation of any kind, and continue to be exploited without any benefit, and only exclusion and suffering, for the native *Hawai’ians*. Islands everywhere are under similar threats.

In reality, the “Beware of the Cat” road signs posted along Iriomote’s roads will not stop the bulldozers, nor will the protests of a few concerned citizens or environmentalists. We hear all this talk about socioeconomic and environmental research, and sustainable land-use strategies that consider the carrying capacity of the natural environment, one where Iriomote islanders might have benefited from conservation, not consumption and misuse, of the Iriomote wilderness. But there is

not a single example of these concepts being applied with any honesty or foresight. It always comes down to profits by a select few, and losses for the public many. As far as government and industry are concerned however, the cat's in the bag. And few people seem to care enough to let it out.