ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effects of ongoing environmental issues related to U.S. military bases in Okinawa. Okinawa’s history, particularly the damage it suffered during World War II has led to an active anti-military movement on the island. The U.S. bases exist in a context of anti-military and environmental movements which seek to dislodge the bases from their current location. At the same time the U.S. military bases have had both direct and indirect effects upon Okinawa’s environment: some positive, though many negative. Some steps the U.S. military could take to lessen its environmental impacts upon Okinawa are suggested.

Key Words: military, environmental history, Japan

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of The Second World War, Okinawa has been a major hub of U.S. Armed Forces in the Pacific, and is home to a significant number of U.S. military bases. These bases are controversial in Okinawa, however, and opposition to them has ebbed and flowed over the years. One significant dimension of opposition to the bases is concern over their environmental impacts. This paper explores the history of the relationship between the U.S. military, the environment, and the Okinawan public, and discusses some actions the U.S. military should consider taking to ameliorate some of Okinawans’ concerns over the environmental impacts of the U.S military presence on the island.

THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN OKINAWA

Over 75% of the land area of U.S. bases in Japan is on Okinawa, and over 60% of the U.S. forces deployed to Japan are stationed there. Major U.S. bases include Kadena Air Base (the largest U.S. airbase outside of the U.S. and home of the Air Force’s 18th Wing); U.S. Marine Corps bases including Camp Hansen and the adjoining Central Training
Area; Marine Corp Air Station (MCAS) Futenma; and the Jungle Warfare Training Center (formerly the Northern Training Area; see Figure 1).

Local attitudes towards the bases on Okinawa are best described as ambiguous but predominantly antagonistic (Taylor 2001). The bases originated during World War II; some as Japanese airstrips and garrisons in places such as Yomitan in central Okinawa. In March of 1945, the U.S. launched a ground invasion of Okinawa with the express purpose of using the island as a launching pad for bombing runs against the Japanese main islands and a large number of new bases were constructed before the fighting on the island was finished. Over 40,000 acres were quickly set aside for bases, airfields, and stor-
The battle of Okinawa, waged from March to June 1945, was the bloodiest of the Pacific War, with more civilians killed than in either the Hiroshima or Nagasaki atomic bombings. Although precise estimates are impossible to verify, most place the number of civilian deaths at around 150,000, approximately one-quarter of Okinawa’s population at the time. During the eighty-day battle, an estimated 7.5 million howitzer rounds, over 60,000 naval shells, 20,000 rockets, and almost 400,000 hand grenades were fired by the American side alone (Feifer 1992). Beyond the horrors this caused to civilians and combatants alike, the battle utterly transformed the environment of large sections of the island, especially the southern part, where the most intense fighting and bombardments took place. As one U.S. Naval officer said, “of the many places on this globe that were touched by the withering blast of war I doubt if in any the life of the people has been more completely changed than on Okinawa” (Karasik 1948, 254). Furthermore, Japanese military historians have admitted that Okinawa was deliberately sacrificed. Japan’s leaders were aware of the impossibility of victory, but viewed their task as necessary in order to weaken the enemy before the dreaded invasion of “home soil.” To the continuing anger of many Okinawans, Japan has never issued an apology for the resulting suffering and sacrifices endured by Okinawa’s civilian population. In order to understand the enduring strength of the island’s anti-base and peace movements, the tremendous impacts this battle and the attitude of the Japanese government towards them has had on Okinawans must be taken into account. Okinawan historian, and former Governor, Mashide Ota puts it simply: “Suffering from bitter wartime experiences, many of the Okinawan people have come to reject the American military bases and everything that is connected with war” (Ota 1999, 36). This underlying attitude permeates every facet of Okinawa-U.S. military relations on the island.

At the war’s end, the US maintained its hold on Okinawa and in consultation with Japan the treaty of San Francisco in 1952 specified that Okinawa and all of the Ryukyu Islands south of 30 degrees north latitude would be indefinitely administered by the U.S. After the communists achieved victory in China in 1949, Okinawa once again became a strategic locale for U.S. troops. Renewed base construction started in 1950, and quickly expanded as the Korean War broke out in the same year. By the late 1950s, all U.S. ground troops in Japan had been moved to Okinawa. The U.S. constructed additional bases on the island, both on former Japanese bases and on other available plots of flat land. Construction projects, whether roads, arsenals, camps, or airfields were generally designed with little consideration of previous land use or ownership patterns. This created resentment towards U.S. land confiscation policies and base construction that escalated throughout the 1950s and early 1960s (Taylor 2001).

Base construction, often by land seizure, continued through the 1960s. By 1967, the U.S. had 51,586.3 acres of private/municipal property, including confiscated lands, under lease, and 24,147.72 acres of public domain land being used free of charge. This area comprised 13.8% of the Ryukyu Islands’ total land area, and 10.9% of its arable land (High Commissioner 1967, 27). At its height, the U.S. had bases on over 25% of Okinawa’s land area. Okinawans, most of whom had only been able to privately own land since 1888, placed a high social value on land ownership. Thus, the land confiscations created great resentment, as well as tremendous changes to Okinawans’ lifestyles and livelihoods. Conflict over land confiscation was the key issue in increasing early public opposition to the bases, although environmental issues, as well as crimes and accidents by military personnel, were also factors. Okinawan and Japanese pacifism were also major issues, fed by growing opposition to U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Increased public opposition eventually contributed to the emergence of a politically
strong reversion movement, which led the U.S. to agree to Okinawa and the Ryukyu Island’s reversion back to Japanese control in 1972 (Watanabe 1970).

After reversion, however, the U.S. bases on Okinawa remained. Although some have been consolidated and others returned to Japanese control, about 18% of the island of Okinawa’s land area is still occupied by U.S. bases. This land was generally prime agricultural land, so the U.S. bases have directly impacted Okinawan land use and economic patterns. With the U.S. confiscating much of the island’s flatter lands for bases, agriculture was forced into hillside areas, and the economy became by stages highly base-dependent. Okinawa’s political economy has changed in the post-reversion period, however, and dependency has largely shifted to a reliance upon largess from the central government, mainly in the form of public works related spending (Kakazu 2000).

Okinawan attitudes towards the bases are bound up in this history. They reflect an amalgamation of the suffering Okinawans endured during the war, a sense of subjugation and domination by outside powers (both Japan and the U.S.), dismay at the erosion of traditional identity (which was partly bound up in pre-war land use and tenure patterns), and frustration at the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of the U.S. military presence (e.g., crime, noise pollution, traffic, and land shortages). On the other hand, economic dependency upon the bases (as well as the construction sector) has fostered some support for the U.S. presence among certain segments of the population, principally landowners who profit from high land rents. From an Okinawan perspective the environmental impact of the U.S. presence is embedded in a historically rooted yet continuously contested context. To most Okinawans, the U.S. has seemed largely oblivious or unsympathetic to Okinawan perspectives.

The U.S. views its presence differently, mainly in terms of larger geopolitical concerns as well as maintaining the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, first signed in 1960. Japan, the third important actor in this triumvirate, views Okinawa as a peripheral, and thus desirable, location for the “burden” of hosting the bases and maintaining the treaty. In addition, regardless of Japanese government attitudes towards Okinawa, few localities within the main Japanese islands would consent to host what are viewed as highly undesirable U.S. bases in Okinawa’s stead.

A number of prominent critics have argued that the end of the Cold War has negated the need for U.S. forces on Okinawa, but the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations have stuck to the view that Okinawa is a tangible symbol of U.S. presence in East Asia, helping to ensure regional stability. From 1995 onwards, officials from the Okinawan prefectural government, Japanese government and U.S. government held a series of meetings to negotiate changes to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which currently provides some immunity from local laws for U.S. personnel and to discuss base reduction, relocation, or consolidation scenarios. These meetings resulted in a number of measures, including plans to relocate the Marine Corps’ helicopter base at Futenma (on which more later). In the wake of these negotiations, the military’s land management and environmental protection improved and some former base areas were returned to Okinawan control. Nonetheless, controversy remains over several key environmental issues and environmental concerns continue to severely affect the process of base relocation.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE U.S. BASES

The U.S. military’s impact upon Okinawa’s environment can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect impacts. Direct impacts include soil erosion (and accompanying ocean pollution), wildfires and vegetative denudation, groundwater and soil contamination, toxic dumping (including PCBs), and noise pollution. Land degradation is an especially serious problem. For example, at the Central Training Area in the northern part of the island, there has been extensive firing of artillery shells. This has led to deforestation, frequent fires, vegetative
denudation, and soil erosion. In addition, the area is covered with unexploded ordnance. While artillery firing has ceased, cleanup of this area is not the legal responsibility of the U.S. and the area's future status has not been discussed by the Japanese and U.S. governments. On the other hand, land degradation is a general problem on non-military lands all over Okinawa. The impacts of agricultural development, forestry, and land conversion have cumulatively had more serious effects than land degradation caused by U.S. military activities (Taylor 2001).

In some cases the U.S. military presence has had direct positive effects upon Okinawa's environment. The area comprising the Jungle Warfare Training Center (JWTC) has been virtually unscathed by military activities and has fairly intact ecosystems. Over the last decade, surveys have found scores of endangered species endemic to Okinawa which exist now only in the JWTC (Ito 1997). Meanwhile, in similar ecological areas outside of the base, Okinawan and Japanese development policies have resulted in extensive deforestation and land clearance (Taylor 2001).

Indirectly, however, U.S. bases have heavily impacted Okinawa's environment through their structural effects on the island's peculiar political economy such as increasing economic dependence on construction and public works and the damming of all of the island's rivers. Okinawa receives large transfer payments from the Japanese government as compensation for hosting such a disproportionately large share of the U.S. bases. This payoff is largely in the form of development funding. The funding goes for the construction of large bridges, land reclamation, the construction of largely superfluous sea walls which ring the island, roads, large under-utilized conference centers, theme parks, and a whole host of other projects that many critics view as unnecessary (McCormack 1999). This largesse is widely recognized as being part of Japan's “construction-state” political economy – an economy inordinately dependent upon public works (McCormack 1996). In Okinawa this dependence has been amplified, first by the post-war economy created around U.S. base construction, and, since reversion, the pattern of Japanese-funded development as compensation for the “pain” borne of hosting the U.S. bases. The result has been an accelerated rate of development on non-military lands. Furthermore, the bases have taken up valuable farm and urban land, further increasing development pressures both on marginal uplands as well as on the densely populated urban sprawl of southern Okinawa.

Overall then, the environmental impacts of U.S. bases are more complicated than they appear. There are direct negative impacts, but also, to a lesser degree, direct positive impacts, in particular the protection of land that would otherwise be developed. There are also long-term structural effects that have skewed the economy in a direction which hastens and furthers environmental degradation.

ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-BASE MOVEMENTS: THE CASE OF HENOKO

Local opposition to the bases has ebbed and flowed. Opposition has tended to coalesce around key events such as the rape of a 12 year-old girl by three servicemen in 1995. This galvanized the anti-U.S. base movement and led to protest assemblies of up to 85,000 people. In response the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) was formed by the U.S. and Japanese governments, who agreed in 1998 to return MCAS Futenma to Okinawa. The facility, located as it was in a congested urban area, was already the target of environmental complaints related to noise and safety issues. The proposed relocation of the airfield, however, has created an ongoing international environmental controversy.

Since the 1995 rape controversy, smaller protests and public unrest have erupted occasionally over hit-and-run incidents, another rape incident, and increasingly, environmental concerns such as toxic wastes and dumping, deforestation and vegetative denudation, and the destruction of coral reefs and coastal habitat. For example, the Okinawa prefectural government has demanded that it be
allowed to conduct its own environmental survey of a U.S. military skeet range closed in 1999. In June 2003, the U.S.-Japanese Joint Committee, which oversees U.S.-Japanese military issues, rejected the demand. The prefecture, which is seeking more control over U.S. activities on the island, “could use the rejection in its battle to change the status of forces agreement between the two countries, a high-ranking prefectural official told the Okinawa Times” (Allen and Sumida 2003). Furthermore, in May 2004, officials and residents of Kin town agreed to intensify protest against the construction of an urban combat training complex at Camp Hansen. The mayor of Kin, Tsuyoshi Gibu also filed a protest with the Japanese government, while the office of Okinawan governor Keiichi Inamine issued a statement opposing the project (Allen and Sumida 2004a).

Okinawan environmental movements have long been characterized by their diversity, but many have worked in varying degrees with anti-base movements (Taylor 2002). There are few large organized groups, but many small ones which form and disband, change names, and change members over time. It is therefore hard to establish a coherent chronology of anti-base environmental activism. In general, however, the convergence of anti-base and environmental movements reflects the intermingling of priorities embedded in local anti-base sentiment. At times, opposition to bases has been beneficial to grassroots environmental struggles while at other times the anti-base movement has allied itself with prefectural governments with poor environmental records. The efficacy of the environmental movement’s alliance with anti-base movements to pursue environmental goals in Okinawa is still an open question.

These dynamics have clearly manifested themselves in the ongoing controversy over the plan to relocate MCAS Futenma to a large airport to be constructed offshore of the village of Henoko, near the current location of Camp Schwab. This plan engendered great opposition, especially from environmentalists, because the base would be constructed in an area that is home to the dugong, an endangered sea mammal related to the manatee. It is also host to one of the few thriving live coral areas on the eastern coast of Okinawa. Initial plans called for the construction of this airport to be directly on top of the Henoko coral reef. This would have endangered a large section of relatively pristine coastline, destroyed the peace and harmony of the small fishing village of Henoko, drastically affected the ecology of the area, and in all probability hastened the demise of the dugong, whose habitat’s northernmost extent coincides almost exactly with the location for the proposed base. The dugong feeds on sea grasses which lie inland of the five coral reefs that comprise the reef structure around Henoko. The breaks between the five reefs allow the dugong access to this feeding area. The proposed airport would have been placed directly on top of these reefs, closing off the dugongs’ access to their food supply (Urashima 2003). In addition, other possibly endangered and rare endemic species have also been found at the site (Japan Times 2003a).

Opposition to the airport was spearheaded by a small grassroots organization, the Save the Dugong Foundation, working with other groups with varying goals in a network of convenience. The movement can be viewed as a convergence of discourses revolving around ecological, peace, women’s, and local anti-base/historic sentiments (Inoue 2004). A number of other movements have sprung up around the Henoko issue itself (for example, Dugong Network Okinawa, Committee Against Heliport Construction, Okinawa-Yaeyama-Shiraho Association for the Protection of Sea and Life, Dugong Protection Fund Committee, and many others). Larger and longer established groups such as the Okinawan Environmental Network have become engaged with the issue, and new groups such as Save the Dugong Campaign Center have formed on the Japanese mainland as well. The environmental dimensions of the movement have also helped bring in international environmental actors such as the U.S.-based Center for Biological Diversity and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), some of whom have also extended
their activism to protesting the construction of new helipads in the JWTC.

Japan has a long history of environmental groups affecting dramatic political change through their lobbying efforts (McKean 1981, Broadbent 1998). Unlike earlier movements, however, the fact of U.S. military involvement in the Henoko issue has garnered international attention and enlarged the geographic scope of the protests. In September 2003, a coalition of Japanese and U.S. environmental groups filed suit against the U.S. Department of Defense (Okinawa Dugong v. Rumsfeld C-03-4350) to prevent the construction of the base without a complete public analysis of the impacts (Earthjustice 2003). The suit alleged that the proposed base violates the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act which calls for public analysis of any overseas project which may impact cultural or natural resources. This lawsuit represents one of the only times that significant actors outside of Okinawa and Japan have become involved with the U.S. base situation in Okinawa.

In March of 2005, the judge presiding in the lawsuit denied a Defense Department motion to dismiss the case, and ordered the agency to investigate its own role in the proposed base as well as its likely environmental impacts. In response to the court action, ongoing protests by Okinawan environmental groups, and negotiations with the government of Japan, the Defense Department agreed to a new plan in which the airbase would be constructed on existing portions of Marine Camp Schwab, but would also include land reclamation of the bay on both sides of the peninsula upon which Schwab juts out. Environmental groups have protested that this new plan would still endanger the habitat of the dugong (Earthjustice 2005). In addition, Okinawan Governor Inamine has stated his lack of support for the plan. The community of Nago, where the new base would be housed, has also rejected the plan, stating that noise pollution from aircraft flight routes would be worse from the new plan than from a base built entirely offshore (Japan Times 2006).

While a pro-base countermovement in Henoko also has emerged, this movement largely draws support from residents who have become economically dependent upon nearby Camp Schwab. It is largely composed of local businesspeople, especially those in the local construction industry, who stand to make substantial profits in new base and development-related construction. Besides local construction interests, outside firms such as Japan’s Shimizu and the U.S. Bechtel Corporation were also heavily engaged in lobbying efforts. This has led one commentator to the conclusion that; “at every level of the decision-making process—from the Japanese government to Okinawa Prefecture to Nago City and Henoko Village—construction companies have intervened. This spectacular battle of vested interests could hardly say more eloquently that the national policy project for relocating the base at Futenma is for nothing but ‘the benefit of businesses’” (Takahashi 2002). The belief that groups who support the Henoko base project are little more than a front for construction industry concerns is widespread within Okinawa, further damaging the U.S. arguments in favor the base’s relocation. There is another source of support for the relocation to Henoko, however: the people of Ginowan in Southern Okinawa. They are currently inconvenienced by the existing airbase at Futenma, which lies directly in the midst of a crowded urban area. In a poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in 2004, eighty-one percent of Okinawans said they opposed the base relocation from Futenma to Henoko (Washington Times 2004).

Given the poor condition of Okinawa’s coastline and existing damage to its coral reefs, of which an estimated 75-90% are dead (Taylor 2001), protecting and preserving this particular marine environment is viewed as a crucial priority by many. Thus, plans to relocate the airbase will likely continue to generate substantial local, national, and even international opposition. The controversy seems to be leading to a coalescence of environmental and anti-military groups in Okinawa and Japan, greatly weakening already-low support for the U.S.’s military presence in Japan. The unpopularity of
the war in Iraq and antipathy towards the Bush administration’s handling of foreign policy in general also exacerbate this tension. Okinawans are increasingly worried that the U.S. bases will become targets for those hostile to the U.S., be it Al Qaeda or North Korea. In May of 2003, an estimated 6,000 people marched in Okinawa in opposition to the base relocation plan (Kyodo News Agency 2003). On April 19, 2004, roughly 100 protestors clashed with employees of a contractor who were building a fence to mark off work space for an environmental survey on the proposed Henoko heliport. Although nobody was injured, the workers were forced to leave the area for the day (Allen and Sumida 2004b). Protests should be expected to increase in size and intensity, if and when construction on the airport ever begins.

CONCLUSIONS

The environmental factors which lead to conflict between Okinawans and the U.S. military are in many ways only symptoms of a larger problem – continued Okinawan antipathy to the very presence of U.S. military personnel and facilities on Okinawan soil. The peace movement and anti-base movements on Okinawa enjoy widespread, if ever-shifting degrees of support from the local population. The long-term implications of this ongoing conflict have yet to be resolved, and whether the Japanese government can hope to continue the status quo in this regard is an open question.

Nonetheless, opportunities for the U.S. military to improve relations with Okinawa do exist, and environmental issues are key. There is little doubt that the U.S. military presence in Okinawa has at times directly been responsible for environmental degradation and therefore contributed to Okinawan dissatisfaction with the U.S. military presence on the island. Chief among the impacts have been past dumping of toxic or hazardous materials, land degradation, and soil erosion. The former of these activities has largely been addressed by reforms within the Department of Defense’s environmental guidelines and remediation and cleanup of PCBs, for example, has been carried out (Japan Times 2003b). Nonetheless, there is still plenty of room for further action. One way of addressing Okinawan concerns about land and water toxins is for the U.S. to assess the extent of toxic wastes they are responsible for and to take the lead in orchestrating their cleanup, despite the costs this will necessarily entail. Taking the lead on this issue would be proof of the U.S.’s commitment to maintaining the welfare and safety of Okinawans. The most important aspect of this would be the willingness to admit past errors and to take responsibility for harm caused. In Japanese culture the admission of wrongdoing and public apologies for one’s actions are extremely important, and would be viewed especially well if these actions were taken without prompting by the Japanese government. A detailed investigation of toxic dumping by the U.S. and Japanese governments should precede any such expression, so as to discover the true extent of the toxics problem on past and present Okinawan bases.

The issue of land degradation has lost some of its salience, given changes in the use of particular base areas. For example, the U.S. has stopped artillery exercises in the Central Training Area, and has even attempted to restore areas where the vegetation has been completely denuded by replanting native species (Taylor 2001). These efforts are important, and they should be continued, prioritized, and publicized. This is also an area in which the U.S. could work with Okinawan civilian and environmental groups to make sure that restoration is done properly and to build better community relations.

Addressing prior environmental degradation through remediation is probably more pertinent than preventing future environmental degradation given the strengthening of environmental regulations by the U.S. military, although here also efforts could be taken. For example, there are concerns about the plan to construct new helicopter landing pads in the Jungle Warfare Training Center, in an area that researchers have determined to be crucial habitat for endangered species such as the Okinawan rail. The U.S. should
make efforts to find new sites for these land- 
ing strips and in the future decision-makers should consult maps of ecologically impor- tant habitats before planning new sites for construction and development on all of its bases. Recent US military reports indicate that the U.S. is considering the expansion of training sites within the Jungle Warfare Training Center with the addition of a small town and tunnel complex (Taylor 2002). Extreme precautions should be taken with the site selection if these plans go forward. Environmental experts on the area, including Okinawans, should be consulted at all stages of the selection process.

Given its fairly pristine condition in compa- rison to the rest of Okinawa, the Jungle Warfare Training Center should become the standard-bearer for the military’s public relations message about its positive effects on some aspects of Okinawa’s environment. Where possible, the military should engage in its own assessments of endangered species on this training area and attempt to promote the idea that its own conservation policies have been comparatively more successful than Okinawan prefectural government actions on adjoining areas. This may make some enemies among those segments of the prefectural government beholden to logging and construction industries in Okinawa’s north, but the underlying message, that the U.S. military has at times literally “help saved Okinawa’s environment,” is a vital one if the U.S. is to gain local support for its presence in the region.

Where possible, the U.S. should continue to work with Okinawan and Japanese en- vironmental groups and expand its efforts in this area. Cooperation levels between the Environmental Division of the U.S. Marine Corps and the non-governmental environmental groups in Okinawa are very good. Environmental officials and staff provide information to NGOs and generally have been friendly and supportive of their efforts. This is particularly the case with non-political NGOs such as the Okinawan Clean Beach Club. Numerous military personnel have taken part in “clean beach” activities alongside locals, picking up trash and debris from local beaches. The military should recognize these individual voluntary activities by U.S. military personnel, and should provide incentives for personnel to volunteer for these activities. Building mili- tary-environmentalist-community networks provides win-win opportunities for the U.S. and local communities. This is one area in which the perceptual gap mentioned earlier between U.S. and local perspectives could be narrowed. This might allow for the political ecology of bases to evolve in a more sustain- able direction by allowing locals to promote more environmentally benign base impacts while not losing the economic benefits pro- vided by the bases.

Ultimately, the U.S. should also take the lead in gaining protected status for well- preserved areas such as the Jungle Warfare Training Area after eventual reversion to Japan. The U.S. could declare its intent to convert parts of this area installation to a preservation or wilderness area, and should also actively lobby for international protected status, such as a UNESCO World Heritage site or a biological reserve, for the undevel- oped parts of Okinawa’s northern Yanbaru forest. Of course this is contingent upon the U.S. returning the areas in question, which is far from certain at this time.

The major complicating factor to improv- ing relations with the Okinawans, however, is the environmental crisis surrounding the proposed Henoko/Schwab airbase. Since this plan was initially proposed, battle lines between environmental and peace activists on the one hand, and the prefectural and national governments along with the U.S. on the other, have been dramatically drawn. Whatever valid claims the military can make about its environmental efforts and its posi- tive effects on Okinawa’s environment, the environmental damage which would result if the airbase were built will undermine any attempts to gain recognition for the positive steps taken by the U.S. military to protect the environment. Indeed, the possibility of an Okinawa crisis similar to that which occurred after the rape case in 1995 should not be
discounted. This crisis, although ultimately resolved, did for a time endanger the entire Japan-U.S. security treaty (Funabashi 1999). Thus the U.S. needs a viable alternative to relocating the Futenma airbase to Nago. Unfortunately the site was chosen by consultation between the Okinawan Prefectural Government and the Japanese Government (with some U.S. input), not the U.S. itself. Numerous other sites have also been proposed by both sides, only to be later rejected by one side or another. Although the U.S. has exhibited some reluctance to go through with the airport relocation and has at times raised the idea of an alternative site, at this point there are seriously entrenched interests in both Japan and Okinawa who will fight against any change (Asahi Shimbun 2004). A number of other options exist, from relocating Futenma’s functions to an already existing base (the idea of combining Futenma’s functions with central Okinawa’s Kadena Airbase is one possibility, initially floated in the SACO discussions of the late 1990s), or to a less environmentally sensitive area, to removing these functions from Okinawa altogether, the latter being the preferred choice for many Okinawans.

Overall, the U.S. needs to consider environmental variables more seriously in its strategic decision-making or risk a large-scale rejection of its entire presence on Okinawa. For example, the Henoko fiasco and the situation with the Jungle Warfare Training Center’s helicopter landing pads could have been avoided if the decision-makers had made better use of the information and expertise gathered by their own environmental employees. This perhaps illustrates that while environmental aspects of military activities on overseas bases are now certainly taken into consideration, they are still not given primacy as factors that can either threaten or promote U.S. strategic goals. If environmental impacts had been seen from the beginning as important issues with the potential to destabilize U.S.-Okinawan relations, the U.S. might not have accepted the Henoko proposal in the first place.

The Okinawa experience also offers broader lessons for the U.S. which argue for greater primacy to be given to environmental aspects of base construction and operation elsewhere. First, more attention has been given to the need for public diplomacy in fighting the war on terrorism and combating rising anti-Americanism. The environment provides an area in which the U.S. has not fully exploited opportunities to build a positive image for itself based upon the military’s positive environmental accomplishments both at home and abroad. On the contrary, lingering resentment and suspicion over past environmental abuse has been fostered by lack of transparency (as in the case of the skeet range study), a refusal to guarantee remediation (such as in Okinawa’s Central Training Area) and a culture of refusing to accept responsibility for prior harm caused.

Second, in addition to physically impacting the environment, base construction and U.S. military presence can have unintended and indirect (positive and negative) long-range consequences on a host area’s political ecology and economy. In order to alleviate this, environmental considerations should be more integral to decision making. Provisions for environmental protection as well as sustainability should be integrated not only into plans for base construction and operations but also into local area development, nation-building, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts as well.

In Okinawa there are a number of historical reasons for antipathy to the bases, some of which are unavoidable given the role of armed conflict in the island’s history. Demonstrating a marked sensitivity to the environment would seem to be a simple and effective means of alleviating at least some of the tensions that continue to surround the U.S. military presence on the island, and to counterbalance some of Okinawans’ cultural and historical antipathy to military bases.

NOTE


High Commissioner. 1967. Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Island. Naha: GRI.


