

The Japan International Border Studies Network: The Ogasawara Files

Travelling from Sapporo to the Ogasawara Islands serves as a reminder of Japan's remarkable diversity of climate, landscapes and peoples. The middle of February marks the end of Sapporo's *yuki matsuri* (snow festival), which sees locals and tourists braving sub-zero temperatures in order to see ice sculptures and performances before they quickly hurry back to the indoor warmth. This year the end of *yuki matsuri* saw a delegation from the Slavic Research Center in Sapporo, as well as a journalist and representative from Nemuro City, leaving the cold behind and departing for Tokyo and the Ogasawara Islands. This was part of fieldwork organised by the *Japan International Border Studies Network (JIBSN)*, which brings together scholars, officials, and policy makers, in order to exchange and share ideas on the challenges and opportunities facing those regions situated on Japan's extreme periphery.

For those enduring a Hokkaido winter, Ogasawara in February represents a kind of paradise. Administratively part of Tokyo city, these islands lie 1,000 km directly south of the capital. There is no airport to connect them with the metropolis and the only way to reach the islands is by ferry - a journey which takes over twenty-four hours and can feel like a lifetime if you suffer from sea-sickness. In comparison, it takes a mere sixteen hours to fly from Sapporo to London, and you can be in Texas in less than twenty. For those on the islands, this distance can be a most serious matter. For example if there is a medical emergency on the islands, a sea plane or helicopter has to be dispatched from a Japanese Self-Defence Force base and then the injured transferred to the mainland, which can take up to seven hours.



Despite the length of the journey the ferry is also a wonderful way to travel. The skyscrapers of Tokyo slowly slip away, while the planes landing at Haneda airport skim overhead. In the distance Mount Fuji looms in the background. However, it isn't long before you find yourself in open sea and a beautiful sunset over the Izu Islands. After a night on the high seas, the morning allows passengers to catch a glimpse of the first uninhabited rocks that make up the Ogasawara Islands. This is also the first chance to see a white-plume of water shooting into the air on the horizon as whales rise from the depths to the ocean's surface.

As the air temperature warms with each passing hour, it was in bright sunshine that we finally arrived in the beautiful tropical bay of Chichi-jima's main port – one of two inhabited islands in the Ogasawara chain. After the murky, brown of Tokyo bay, Chichi-jima's bay was complete with golden sands, and a sea made up of all the colours between blue and green. However, our delegation had no time to get used to dry land, as we immediately embarked on a smaller boat to Haha-jima. This relatively short two and a half hour journey was accompanied by swooping sea-gulls, whale-watching, and even flying fish.

Almost thirty hours after leaving Tokyo, we finally arrived at our destination. With a population of just 450, one of our first research visits on Haha-jima was to the abandoned village of Kita-mura, which has now been almost entirely reclaimed by the jungle. We also visited Haha-jima's combined elementary and junior high school (with 48 students – about five in each year), a museum to Rolf's Rulf – a German immigrant who arrived on Haha-jima in 1869, the garbage recycle centre, an agriculture experiment station,

and the emergency heliport. We learnt from local experts how the township of Haha-jima delivers services to its residents, and how the islands have adapted to changing economic and geopolitical realities.



The next day we returned to Chichi-jima, which gave an opportunity for representatives of our group – both scholars and officials from municipal districts - to exchange ideas. Much of our research involved looking at how the Ogasawara Islands manage their isolation from the mainland. The JIBSN delegation included representatives from the Ogasawara Islands (Tokyo City), Yonaguni Island and Taketomi Islands (Okinawa-prefecture), as well as Nemuro city (Japan’s most easterly administrative district on Hokkaido). At our meetings on Ogasawara it became apparent that through this network new insights into mutual problems could be formulated and with it a framework for creating proposals to central government, which have the potential to be widely supported.

There was lively discussion and sharing of information on topics such as broad-band mobile communication, managing waste, education, agriculture, tourism, and relations with Tokyo. JIBSN provides a unique forum for formal and informal communication between officials of peripheral areas facing similar challenges. We saw many cases where the experiences of one island can have applicability for resolving problems in other peripheral areas of Japan. We also saw the connections and opportunities that isolation can bring, as Chichi-jima and Yonaguni Island are currently part of a ground-breaking project for exploring our universe through radio astronomy. From these island bases, huge radio telescopes are mapping the universe and measuring it to the most accurate degree ever. In this case peripheral island communities are coming together in new and surprising ways.



One key topic of discussion was the benefits and challenges of the Ogasawara Islands becoming a World Heritage Site in July 2011. Our delegation joined a boat trip with “Stanley”, a resident of Ogasawara from European descent, who showed us the rich biodiversity, tropical fish, sea snakes, whales, golden sands, rare species, and magnificent reefs. On the Ogasawara Islands 36% of plants and 95% of land snails are endemic species that can be found nowhere else. However, many of our discussions with

the local administration and experts focussed on how an increase in tourism from world heritage status will put pressure on the environment and the resources needed to manage this.

We saw the damage that has been wrought on the islands' wildlife by human influence, with many invasive species destroying the islands' indigenous plants and animals. Feral goats eat endemic plants, flatworms destroy rare land snails, and alien plants out-compete native species. Measures have been put in place – such as mats and brushes to remove plant seeds and small insects from visitors' clothes and shoes - however will they be able to cope with increased tourist numbers? Addressing such questions were a vital part of our research visit.

Today there is an active effort to try and undo the environmental damage of the past. Goats are hunted to prevent the destruction of wildflowers and plants, while rats are poisoned and cats captured in order to stop them chasing and killing the native bird populations. There has also been a huge wall erected to keep the goats and cats out of specially designated areas and an information campaign has been implemented to advise tourists how to protect the unique environment.

Our delegation saw first-hand how the Ogasawara Islands are an extraordinary place. These islands are a reminder of how borders and islands are places of interaction between peoples and nature. The islands are a place where residents of European descent mix with Japanese and build lives together. These islands were also at one time divided in times of conflict but have today become a symbol of a common human goal to preserve our environment. Despite their distance from Tokyo, they are a place of continual change and in Chichi-jima's peaceful bay the arrival of a Japanese frigate served to remind us how border regions are at the same time caught up in shifting regional geopolitics. The Japan International Border Studies Network is at the centre of analysing and researching the complex environmental, political, and social changes that we witnessed on the Ogasawara Islands. This unique forum provides a chance to share ideas and build a network of collaboration linking all of Japan's borderlands.

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