

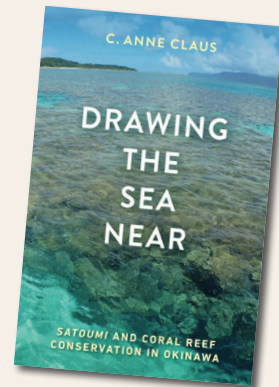
BOOK REVIEW

Drawing the Sea Near: Satoumi and Coral Reef Conservation in Okinawa

By C. Anne Claus

University of Minnesota Press, 2020
249 pages.

Reviewed by Aike P. ROTS



The Ryukyu Islands are home to many coral reefs, which are of great importance for marine biodiversity. These coral reefs and the species that depend on them are threatened by pollution and climate change, and in recent years large parts of the reefs have died. In response, Japanese and Okinawan actors have set up various coral reef conservation initiatives. In her new book, C. Anne Claus introduces some of the activities of marine conservation NGOs on the islands of Ishigaki and Okinawa. The result is an original, ethnographically rich, and convincingly interdisciplinary monograph of interest not only to environmental anthropologists and Okinawan studies scholars, but also to scholars working in development studies, political ecology, and nature conservation more broadly.

Drawing the Sea Near takes us to the coastal town of Shiraho on Ishigaki in the Ryukyu archipelago (Okinawa Prefecture). It introduces Sango Mura (Coral Village), a WWF field station where long-term conservation work has taken place. In the 1980s and 1990s, the WWF joined forces with a local protest movement and prevented the construction of a new airport on reclaimed land that would have destroyed the coral reef. In the following decades, the WWF field station in Shiraho transitioned from “conservation-far”—initiatives implemented by transnational organizations that fail to engage local populations actively—to “conservation-near”—initiatives that “cultivate proximity,” “invite intimacy,” and “create conservation affect” (p. 10), which actively engage local communities. In Coral Village, the transition from “conservation-far” to “conservation-near” can largely be accredited to one charismatic individual, director Kamimura Masahito. Claus describes Kamimura as a *yosomono* (p. 17), an outsider to the worlds of international conservation, natural science, and the community of Shiraho, who was able to negotiate and bridge the three. He is one of the main actors in the book, and consistently referred to by his first name, which creates a sense of intimacy. (Mistakenly, he is also listed by his first name in the index.)

The monograph is divided into an introduction, six long, thematically organized chapters, and five short ethnographic vignettes in between. Chapter 1 presents the history of the anti-airport struggle in Shiraho and the start of the WWF’s presence in the area. It also provides background information about the colonial history of Okinawa, and the lingering consequences of this history, including the ongoing U.S. military presence (which

mainly affects the main island of Okinawa, not Ishigaki). When discussing relations between mainland Japanese conservationists and Okinawan actors, Claus argues that “the problematic colonial [North-South] dynamic evident in many transnational conservation projects is replicated in domestic Japanese environmentalism” (p. 38). This is hardly surprising, given that the Ryukyu Islands are still very much treated as a colony and that inconvenient Okinawan majority opinions are ignored by Tokyo. It is nonetheless important information for readers not familiar with Japan, who may not be aware that Japan is a *de facto* colonial state that structurally ignores the rights of indigenous minorities. Claus’s study demonstrates that colonial power dynamics and epistemologies are reproduced by Japanese nature conservation and development NGOs, not only in the global south (see Watanabe 2019 for an example), but also *within* the Japanese archipelago.

Chapter 2 takes us away from Shiraho and presents a genealogy of the Japanese term *satoumi*—the marine equivalent of *satoyama*—and its uses in conservation discourse. Claus makes clear that *satoumi* does not refer to one particular type of seascape—coves and bays in mainland Japan are different from the shallow nearshore sea (*ino*) and coral reefs of Ishigaki—but to a particular conservation *imaginary*, which acknowledges the significance for ecosystems of human cultural practices. The environmental imaginary evoked by *satoumi* and *satoyama* is profoundly different from the “wilderness” paradigm that has influenced conservation practices worldwide. It acknowledges the role of humans as “one species collaborator among many” (p. 46), instead of seeking to construct a “wild nature” from which humans are expelled. Here Claus does a good job introducing, historicizing, and contextualizing the emergence and popularization of *satoumi*, acknowledging its conceptual strength without romanticizing it. I have long been looking for a scholarly introduction to *satoumi* that I can assign to students, so I am indebted to Claus for this useful and comprehensive chapter.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the core of the monograph. It is here that the reader really gets to know Coral Village, the Shiraho community, and Kamimura. We learn how Coral Village gradually departed from standard WWF conservation practice and became more inclusive and participation-based. Some activities organized by Coral Village are hardly meaningful from the perspective of international nature conservation, but they serve to involve and engage the local community. These activities include a Sunday market, cooking classes, and the reconstruction of a traditional *inkachi* fish pond. According to Kamimura (and Claus), such projects involving the local community will have better results for conservation than top-down projects that fail to consider local sensitivities and cultural traditions.

Chapters 3 and 4 are rich, full of interesting ethnographic details, and written in a lively and accessible style. The same applies to the short vignettes between the chapters, which introduce different aspects of community life in Shiraho: folk songs about crabs, harvesting seagrass in the *ino*, rituals for the sea gods, and more. Reading these, I felt a strong desire to go to Ishigaki, wade through the *ino*, and try those grilled clams myself. They are compelling ethnographic accounts.

Chapter 5 brings together the analysis of chapter 2 with the ethnographic material from chapters 3 and 4. Here we learn more about how the conflicting epistemologies of international conservation (WWF, IUCN, UN), marine science, and local ecological knowledge are negotiated on the ground. It is an insightful chapter, relevant not only for

development anthropologists and ecologists but also for nature conservation professionals. I was particularly intrigued by Kamimura Masahito's role: how he maintains good relations with scientists and the WWF's headquarters, using scientific knowledge to legitimize controversial decisions such as the construction of the *inkachi*, while simultaneously "cultivating autonomous 'offstage' spheres" (p. 164). His aim is to explore a diversity of practices that lead to increased community participation, even if they do not constitute "proper" nature conservation according to some.

Finally, in chapter 6, Claus introduces a coral restoration company on Okinawa island named Sea Seed, hundreds of kilometers away from Ishigaki, unrelated to Coral Village and the WWF. It is a fascinating case study. Tourists can invest in coral restoration by sponsoring transplanted coral, pictures of which are uploaded to the internet, together with individual messages that serve for memorialization, sponsoring, or even "petitioning the gods" like *ema* at shrines (p. 193). However, I struggled to see the connections between this corporate, tourism-based coral reef restoration project on Okinawa Island and the community-centered "conservation-near" Coral Village in Ishigaki. Claus does not bring the two cases together in a conclusion, and the Sea Seed case does not fit very well with the rest of the monograph. It could have been left out, making chapter 5 the last and concluding chapter of the book.

Another small point of criticism concerns the transcription of Japanese words. The おゝ sound, for instance, is sometimes transcribed as *ō*, sometimes as *ou*, and often simply as *o*. On page sixty-three, for example, there is *kougai* and *kankyo*, instead of *kōgai* and *kankyō*.

These are minor issues, however. All in all, this is an excellent study. It is written in an accessible and engaging style, which makes it one of those rare academic books that will be of interest both to experts in the field *and* to undergraduate and postgraduate students. It is a rich, theoretically informed ethnography with profound implications for nature conservation not only in Okinawa and Japan, but globally.

REFERENCE

Watanabe 2019

Chika Watanabe. *Becoming One: Religion, Development, and Environmentalism in a Japanese NGO in Myanmar*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.