

The Role of Local Communities in the Nature Conservation: A Case Study of Yambaru Area in the Northern Part of Okinawa Island, Japan

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Abstract

Global biodiversity has been in a critical situation, and it is indicated that one million species of plants and animals could become extinct within the next few decades. It also means that humans are losing the ecosystem services that our economic and social activities depend on. Therefore, the world is now seeking for “Nature Positive” society, and to achieve this goal, all the stakeholders need to play important roles and to collaborate with each other. In this study, we particularly focus on local communities aiming to identify their possible contributions towards nature conservation from a case study, so that the findings can give useful insights for other cases. Local communities are regarded as indispensable actors for the conservation and sustainable use of the natural environment all over the world, and we chose an area in Japan with various community-based conservation as a study site, which is Kunigami Village in Yambaru area, the northern region of Okinawa Island. Yambaru consists of evergreen broadleaf forests, one of the largest ones in Japan, with rich biodiversity including various endemic species such as *Yambaruikauna* (*Hypotaenidia okinawae*), and it is newly registered as the World Natural Heritage site in 2021. The study methods were qualitative including literature review; 7 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders such as community leaders, a forester, an officer of local tourism association, an ecotourism interpreter, an officer of the village office, a governmental officer; and participant observation in actual conservation activities by local people. Results identifies their proactive activities for conservation, management, and sustainable use of the natural environment before and after registration of the World Heritage site, which has continued from the 1990s to the present in 2023, including a well-organized ecotourism for the purpose of conservation and sustainable use of the natural areas, forest patrolling for combating poaching, and environmental educations in the elementary schools. It is also revealed that the historical and cultural connections to nature of local people in Yambaru are one of the important triggers for biodiversity conservation. In addition, their efforts to make a balance between conservation and tourism in the World Natural Heritage site are significant, by showing tourism management schemes on biodiversity conservation, and these activities have potentials of regional development of the area which has obtained the least economic benefits within Okinawa Island so far. In this case, local communities are playing a critical role for biodiversity conservation and regional development and the results can give useful insights of community-based conservation in other villages with similar situations in the world.

Keywords: *Biodiversity, Community-based conservation, Yambaru, the World Natural Heritage, Ecotourism*