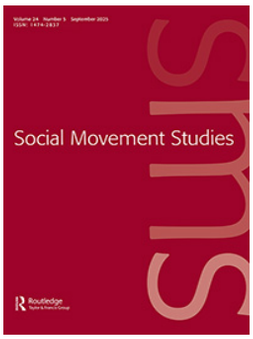

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Not seeing the forest for the helicopters: UNESCO recognition and resistance to the US military in Okinawa

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found that when activists' demands are not met by their home government, activists may adopt transnational strategies to levy international pressure on their government. While a growing body of literature explores how civil society organizations may take their causes to intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the United Nations (UN) to exert pressure on their home governments, it overlooks the variation in the forms of IGOs and the ways that activists use them to exert leverage. The anti-helipad/Osprey movement in Okinawa, Japan, shows how activists may use state-initiated processes of international recognition, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Natural Heritage (WNH) status, to levy international pressure. Drawing on interviews and other primary sources, I demonstrate how environmental activists leveraged the Japanese government's 2017 nomination of Northern Okinawa (primarily encompassing the Yambaru Forest) to garner international attention for the Northern Training Area (NTA) and its environmental impacts. I argue that this strategy was especially salient in Japan, given the Japanese government's efforts at crafting a national identity and image as a global environmental leader and a tourist destination. While the WNH designation was ultimately granted, activists' efforts pressured the Japanese government to release previously private information about the US military presence in the area, as well as opened a channel for future international pressure.

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In July 2021, four sites in Japan received World Natural Heritage (WNH) status from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which assists UNESCO in evaluating potential new natural heritage sites. These new Japanese WNH sites included Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, the northern part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island (Four natural and three cultural sites added to UNESCO's World Heritage List, 2021). However, WNH inscription can be a mixed blessing. The inscription of the third site on this list, the northern part of Okinawa Island, was indeed a cause for concern for many Okinawan environmental activists. The WNH site in the northern part of Okinawa Island, consisting primarily of the Yambaru Forest, hosts a major US military facility and several US military helipads, six constructed in the past 15 years despite local

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opposition. Activists and residents have raised concerns about the base's environmental impact, known as the Northern Training Area (NTA), and the helipads, especially on the endemic and endangered species living in the forest. Despite these concerns, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment began the UNESCO nomination process in 2017, initially without disclosing the presence of the US military in the Yambaru Forest. Environmental activists used the Japanese government's UNESCO bid to draw international attention to the presence of the NTA in the forest and its negative impacts. Although the nomination dossier was resubmitted and ultimately approved, activists gained limited concessions from the Japanese government (disclosure about Japan's cooperation with the US over the NTA and the US military's environmental management procedures) and brought international attention to the NTA, a pathway that activists have continued to use.

When and why do governments' pursuit of international recognition create new channels for domestic activism? Canonical studies have examined transnational activism and its ability to leverage international pressure on domestic policymakers (Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Risse-Kappen et al., 1999; Tarrow, 2005). However, in an increasingly interconnected world, activists have innovated their transnational strategies beyond those described in these seminal studies. While many scholars have advanced the literature beyond these early studies (e.g., Temper, 2019; Waites, 2019; Zajak, 2017), the transnational activism literature does not capture environmental activists' strategies in this case. The literature on translocal assemblages (e.g., McFarlane, 2009), despite its more in-depth focus on the actors involved in transnational activism, does not consider the targets and effectiveness of activists' strategies. Therefore, this existing literature cannot fully explain this case of transnational activism.

Like many other movements, activists in Okinawa turned to the international community when their government was largely unresponsive to their demands. However, their strategies were innovative in several ways and suggest important nuances that the transnational activism literature has not yet considered. First, instead of merely trying to change the 'venue' through which they made their claims, they also couched their claims in terms of international discourse about environmental preservation rather than about US bases in Japan. As Kim (2022) argues, framing issues about the US military in environmental terms is a type of pragmatic framing and more likely to garner public support than nationalist frames against the US military or ideological frames against militarization because it is more tangible. Furthermore, framing this as an environmental issue instead of a security-related issue is less likely to be perceived as threatening to the state (Tarrow, 2005, p. 213). As discussed below, activists' previous attempts to win concessions from the Japanese and US governments about issues related to the NTA and the helipads were largely unsuccessful. This case suggests that activists might also change frames, especially when there is international discourse about the issue area, when they are not granted concessions by their government.

I argue that environmental issues are especially salient to Japan, given the work that the Japanese government has done to cast Japan as a global environmental leader in the post-WWII era. Additionally, the Japanese government has focused on tourism as a strategy for elevating its international image, and UNESCO designation is an important part of those efforts. Through informing UNESCO that Japan's proposed World Heritage site in the Yambaru Forest was adjacent to a US military presence that the Japanese government had not disclosed in its nomination file, Okinawan civil society

organizations (CSOs) threatened the prospects of receiving UNESCO designation of the site and the image of Japan as a global environmental leader. While the Yambaru Forest was ultimately granted World Heritage status, it was not without the Japanese government publicly disclosing information about the US presence in the area for the first time.

Secondly, activists may themselves reach out to intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to leverage international pressure on their governments, rather than or in addition to seeking assistance from activists in other countries (Zajak, 2017). In the case of the Yambaru Forest, environmental activists appealed directly to IGOs, which are underwritten by international laws that activists can employ to hold their governments accountable and have their own agency; IGOs themselves can try to hold member states accountable for violating institutional laws. However, leveraging UNESCO recognition is distinct from activists' appeals to other IGOs that have been examined in previous studies (Passy, 1999; Raustiala, 1997; Tarrow, 2005; Zajak, 2017). UNESCO recognition is a state-led process where state governments apply for nomination; CSOs and other actors cannot file a nomination (*World Heritage List Nominations, n.d.*). However, once a state has filed a nomination, activists may draw international attention to issues related to the nominated site, as Okinawan activists did in this case. Additionally, even though the site was granted UNESCO status, activists believe that Yambaru's new designation has permanently opened a pathway for them to draw international attention to the US military presence at the site. Therefore, there is variation even among strategies where activists appeal to IGOs.

In the sections that follow, I examine this case using interviews of Japanese activists and researchers (conducted over 2019–2023)[1] and other primary sources. Next, I provide an overview of the literature on transnational activism, followed by a discussion of Japanese national identity. I then discuss the history of the US military in Yambaru Forest and Japan's campaign for UNESCO recognition.

Transnational activism

While CSOs and social movement activists are rooted in particular domestic contexts (Tarrow, 2005, p. 29), they may take their causes to the international level. Studies over the past several decades have profiled the various reasons and strategies for transnational advocacy. This may include linking with other CSOs or bringing claims to other state governments and international organizations. One concept used to understand transnational activism is a transnational advocacy network (TAN), a network of CSOs, typically focused on similar issue areas, that are connected within and across countries (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). CSOs create transnational advocacy networks in part to exchange information and share strategies. TANs also provide domestic activists with another avenue through which to pursue their claims, especially when their own governments have not granted them concessions, through what Keck and Sikkink (1999) have termed the 'Boomerang Model.' An important feature of the Model is the use of international pressure to influence the behavior of the target state (the state that is committing rights violations) or pressure other states to exert pressure on the target state.

Another way to understand transnational advocacy is through the concept of translocal assemblages. 'Assemblage' refers to the temporary 'coming together of various entities into a loose aggregate' (Davies, 2012, p. 274), such as CSOs and activists. The 'translocal'

element of the concept signifies that this gathering of actors is simultaneously locally and globally embedded (Davis, 2017b, p. 163). While the 'nodes' in transnational advocacy networks are singular CSOs, the concept of translocal assemblage allows for a variety of actors 'assembled' together and provides more details about the nature of the connections between the various actors involved (McFarlane, 2009, p. 566). For example, a translocal assemblage approach can not only provide more insights about the actors involved but also how strategies emerge and are shared among actors (Davis, 2017a, p. 113, 2017b, p. 163; McFarlane, 2009, p. 561). Similarly, assemblage considers the dynamic nature of transnational activism over time and activists' agency in creating transnational connections (Davies, 2012 –277;, pp. 276; McFarlane, 2009, p. 561).

Both literatures reveal three important features of transnational activism. First, tactics and frames diffuse through international connections into local and national contexts (Davis, 2017a –113, pp. 112; 2017b –168, pp. 166; Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 95; Tarrow, 2005, p. 2). For example, activists in Henoko, Okinawa adapted using kayaks to occupy Oura Bay to block the construction of a new base from other movements (Davis, 2017a, pp. 113–114). Second, transnational connections can build invaluable solidarity between activists and CSOs. In transnational anti-militarization activism, for example, activists in one community may travel to another to learn from and support the local movement (Davis, 2017a, p. 112, 2017b, p. 159, 161, 167–168). Finally, activists can use international pressure to advance their local and national claims. Two key concepts in this regard are what Keck and Sikkink term 'leverage politics' and 'accountability politics.' One type of leverage politics, moral leverage, involves making or threatening to make an issue or a state's conduct more visible to the international community, potentially harming a state's reputation (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 97). Similarly, accountability politics involves reminding a government (and/or the international community) of a position it has stated publicly and 'expos[ing] the distance between discourse and practice' (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, pp. 97–98).

Other studies have explored the ways that CSOs directly interact with IGOs like the United Nations (UN). IGOs can serve as venues in which CSOs bring their claims. The UN is especially important as a venue in which all countries send representatives, and 'gives states and [CSOs] opportunities to meet' (Passy, 1999, p. 152). CSOs sometimes bring their claims directly to IGOs to pressure their national governments into conceding to their claims (Passy, 1999, p. 152; Tarrow, 2005, p. 151). CSOs may bring attention to states' violations of international rules within the context of the IGO (Passy, 1999, p. 160). In the UN, for example, CSOs may draw attention to their government's failure to fully implement UN resolutions or declarations (Passy, 1999, p. 165).

UNESCO recognition and its importance to Japan

As the previous section demonstrates, many studies have documented CSOs' and activists' use of transnational connections to situate their local or national claims within transnational discourses and communities, connecting both with other CSOs and activists, and IGOs like the UN. However, activists' use of Japan's bid to gain UNESCO recognition for the Yambaru Forest to bring international attention and pressure against the local US military presence cannot fully be explained by these studies. While the concept of translocal assemblage captures the interaction among actors making claims, it

does not explicitly consider where these actors bring their claims. While TANs and the Boomerang Model incorporate IGOs into their framework, they do not explicitly theorize the direct interaction between CSOs and activists, and IGOs (Tarrow, 2005, p. 146). Finally, while the literature on CSOs and IGOs can help explain what CSO-IGO interaction looks like, it does not capture variation across IGOs that may provide different transnational opportunities and challenges (such as the state-led process of UNESCO recognition).

Capitalizing on UNESCO recognition differs from other forms of appealing to IGOs. Unlike other UN processes, UNESCO recognition is entirely state-initiated; CSOs cannot apply independently for World Heritage recognition (*World Heritage List Nominations, n.d.*). While UNESCO recognition brings international prestige and potential economic benefits, states are not obligated to pursue nominations. However, the case of Yambaru Forest in Okinawa suggests that once a state government has submitted a nomination to UNESCO, it opens a potential pathway for CSOs' claim-making. After the Japanese government submitted its nomination file to UNESCO and included the northern part of Okinawa Island (containing the Yambaru Forest) as a natural heritage site, Okinawan environmental CSOs contacted UNESCO and IUCN to inform them that the nomination file excluded information about the US military presence near the nominated site.[2] If the Japanese government had never applied for World Heritage designation for this site, Okinawan CSOs would not have had this window of opportunity to draw international attention to the US military in the area. Additionally, this pathway created pressure on the Japanese government to choose between including information about the NTA in their nomination file, potentially ruining the chance that the site would be awarded World Heritage designation, or dropping the nomination.

Leveraging potential UNESCO status can apply a formidable amount of international and/or domestic pressure on a state's government. UNESCO recognition feeds into 'nation branding,' 'a process by which a nation's images can be created, monitored, evaluated, and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience' (Fan, 2010, p. 101). States engage in nation branding to encourage international trade with and investment in their country (Dinnie, 2008, p. 6), as well as to facilitate positive international public perceptions (Dinnie, 2008, p. 8). Tourism specifically is a 'well established and familiar' nation branding tool (Dinnie, 2008, p. 8). UNESCO recognition is thus desirable in that it 'immediately bestows a national and international profile on the site or practice [. . .] it is then in an excellent position to be marketed by the nation concerned as a special and attractive tourist destination' (Caust & Vecco, 2017, pp. 1–2). Having UNESCO-designated natural or cultural heritage is a boon for states' nation branding endeavors, and activists' interference in the UNESCO nomination process, delaying or denying the designation, may induce states to grant at least partial concessions, particularly as they relate to the designation process. In this case, for example, activists' efforts to bring UNESCO and IUCN attention to the adjacent NTA led to the IUCN recommending that the Japanese government withdraw and edit the nomination to add land that the NTA formerly occupied (Yoshikawa, 2019, p. 5). This led to the inclusion of previously undisclosed information about the NTA and US-Japan cooperation on the NTA in the subsequent dossier (Yoshikawa & Kawamura, 2019, p. 1).

Beyond the desirability of UNESCO designation for any government, I argue that this UNESCO designation was especially important to the Japanese government as it touches on the Japanese national image and national identity. While a state's national image is outward-facing, national identity is how a nation views itself (Fan, 2010, p. 5). National identity relates to the ontological security literature in international relations, which suggests that security is not only 'of the physical body but [also] of the self or identity, the subjective sense of who one is that enables and motivates action and choice,' and states feel secure when they have a stable sense of self (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 1). Identity is created and sustained through both social interaction (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 2) and 'the domestic production and maintenance of self-understandings' (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 6). Thus, national identities and images are connected, which is evident in the Japanese case.

Scholars argue that Japan has long been anxious about its status in the international system, due to its liminal position as both part of Asia and part of 'the West' (Kim, 2024, pp. 677–678). As such, it has both tried to establish itself as a leader in Asia, distinguishing itself as superior to other Asian countries, and as a contributing member of the Western-led international order (Kim, 2024, pp. 678–679). After the end of WWII, when Japan found itself trying to recover economically and politically, Japanese leaders searched for both a new national identity and image (Akagawa, 2016, pp. 35–37). Japan's economy soared in the 1960s–1980s in part due to state-led economic development, giving rise to a post-war wave of nationalism focused on its economic success (Akagawa, 2016 –37, pp. 36; Yoshino, 1995, p. 163). The *nihonjinron* (translated to 'things about Japan') literature that materialized during this time attributed Japan's economic success to Japan's societal and cultural features (Yoshino, 1995, p. 166). In this sense, Japan's national identity and image became an economic success story in the image of the proverbial phoenix and as a state whose economy could compete with industrialized countries in the West.

At the same time, Japan's newfound economic prowess had negative effects on its national image and sense of self. Economic competitors like the US engaged in '"Japan-bashing" in [the] media and the negative stereotyping of the Japanese character' (Akagawa, 2016, pp. 36–37). Similarly, Japan's rising economy was met with anti-Japanese sentiment in Southeast Asia (Iwabuchi, 2015, p. 420). To improve its international image, the Japanese government began creating various agencies to promote Japanese culture and cooperation with Japan abroad in the 1970s (Casado Claro et al., 2023, p. 67). Japan's economic industrialization also coincided with significant pollution and environmental degradation both in Japan and in countries in which Japanese companies conducted business, which became the target of international CSO campaigns (Schreurs, 2004, pp. 88–90). Finally, given its growing economy and international profile, other states began to pressure Japan to contribute more to the international community (Schreurs, 2004, p. 91) and criticized Japan's 'allegedly insular and closed behaviour' (Dinnie, 2008, p. 9).

Accordingly, the Japanese government embarked on a variety of initiatives to improve its national image, which impacted its national identity. Two areas are especially germane to the politics surrounding Yambaru Forest's UNESCO designation: environmental issues and tourism. Japan began to recast itself as a leader on environmental issues in the 1980s and 1990s (Schreurs, 2004, p. 89). One way that Japan began establishing itself

as a 'good international citizen' was through its substantial Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs, which, over time, began explicitly factoring in environmental protection (Schreurs, 2004, p. 97). Japan has also played an active role in UNESCO itself, as exemplified by Japan's Matsuura Koichiro serving as the Director-General of UNESCO from 1999 to 2009 (Akagawa, 2016, pp. 44–45). Additionally, Japan has initiated and funded regional environmental programs and participated in international programs, perhaps best exemplified by Japan hosting the 1997 Kyoto Conference on climate change (Schreurs, 2004, pp. 95–96). The Japanese government's effort to recast Japan as a global environmental leader was also internalized in Japan, as evidenced by stricter domestic environmental legislation and the pursuit of more environmentally friendly practices for Japanese businesses (Schreurs, 2004, pp. 94–95). Furthermore, some Japanese citizens see themselves as environmental leaders, given the long history of environmental activism in Japan (Schreurs, 2004, pp. 99–101).

Japan has also focused on promoting tourism over the past several decades, to both win international 'hearts and minds but also [. . .] hard cash' (Casado Claro et al., 2023, p. 74). Prime Minister Koizumi (2001–2006) began to focus on Japan's nation branding in earnest and instituted several committees for this purpose, including the Committee for Tourism Nation in 2003 (Iwabuchi, 2015, p. 423). Tourism was also a part of the administration's comprehensive 'Cool Japan' nation branding strategy, especially important for Japan at a time when its economy was stagnating (Casado Claro et al., 2023, p. 74). Accordingly, the Japanese government launched its 'Yokoso Japan' ('Visit Japan') campaign in 2003, 'with the goal of attracting 10 million overseas visitors by 2010' (*Japan Tourism Agency JTA, n.d.*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Japanese government designated Northern Okinawa (as well as other areas) as a candidate for World Heritage nomination in 2003 (Ministry of the Environment, Government of Japan, n.d.-a).

The UNESCO nomination process gave Okinawan activists a channel to bring international attention to and pressure against the Japanese government, threatening to undermine Japan's national image and identity as a global environmental leader and tourist destination. Because of Japan's status anxiety and its 'approval-seeking and distinction-seeking behavior,' it is especially sensitive to potential blows to its national image (Kim, 2024, pp. 669–670). By alerting UNESCO and IUCN that the Japanese government had not disclosed that the site in the Yambaru Forest was adjacent to a US military base, Okinawan CSOs threatened the site's ability to receive World Heritage status. Several studies have found that military bases cause environmental degradation (Alvarez, 2016; Hooks & Smith, 2004), and the US military presence in the Yambaru Forest is no exception. Furthermore, military-related environmental pollution is not limited to base-occupied land but can spread elsewhere (Kawamura, 2019). Given Japan's image as an environmental leader, it did not want to have a natural heritage site refused UNESCO status because of environmental pollution. Additionally, it did not want to lose the economic and nation branding opportunities that UNESCO designation offers. Thus, by nominating the Yambaru Forest site, the Japanese government opened itself up to international pressure brought by the CSOs' appeals. As discussed below, this was a positive development for the CSOs in Yambaru, as previous activism against the US military presence was met with few concessions.

The US military in Yambaru Forest

Following the end of WWII, the US military established a significant presence in Okinawa, which today hosts over 70% of Japan's land exclusively used by the US military, despite being only 0.6% of the nation's total landmass (Okinawa Prefectural Government, 2018, p. 2). Among these bases is Camp Gonsalves in Yambaru Forest, also known as the Northern Training Area (NTA), chosen for its jungle-like terrain (Nelson, 2012, p. 830; Nishibu, 2023, p. 31; Ogawa, 2016, p. 229). Okinawans have raised concerns about the NTA's environmental impact, citing noise pollution, stray bullet shells, and potential use of Agent Orange during the Cold War (Nelson, 2012, p. 831). All of these potential environmental threats could endanger Fukuji Dam, a major water source in Okinawa, and the wildlife endemic to Yambaru Forest (Ogawa, 2016, p. 230). However, activists have received few concessions from the Japanese and US governments.

Civilian-military tensions escalated in the 2000s due to shifts in the US presence. A rape incident in 1995 sparked major protests, prompting the creation of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) in 1996 to address civilian-military tension (Akibayashi, 2002; McCormack & Norimatsu, 2018). The SACO found that both governments needed to reduce Okinawa's base burden (*kichi futan*) and made two major recommendations. The first was to relocate Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma outside of densely populated Ginowan City to the seaside town of Henoko, essentially expanding Marine Camp Schwab (Ogawa, 2016, p. 231; Okinawa Prefectural Government, 2018). The second recommendation was to return half of the NTA, with some of its functions transferred to the base in Henoko (Ogawa, 2016, p. 231).

The Japanese and US governments decided they would need to construct six new helipads within the Yambaru Forest to compensate for the closure of Futenma and the return of half of the NTA, in addition to the 15 already located in Yambaru (Ogawa, 2016, p. 231). Many residents disliked the plan, not only because of the addition of more helipads in the forest, but also because the Japanese government stated that MV-22 Osprey helicopters would use them (Nelson, 2012, p. 831; Nishibu, 2023, p. 32; Ogawa, 2016, p. 231). Residents in and around Yambaru, as well as elsewhere in Japan, have been concerned about Osprey deployments due to their reputation for accidents (Horiuchi & Tago, 2023, p. 7).

In the mid-2000s, locals created tent sites in the village of Takae (close to the NTA's gates) to monitor and impede the helipads' construction (Nelson, 2012, p. 831; Ogawa, 2016, p. 231). Despite activists' efforts, however, the Okinawa Defence Bureau (ODB), the local branch of the Japanese central government's Ministry of Defense, continued with the construction and often clashed with activists. The ODB filed a variety of lawsuits against activists obstructing the construction throughout the project (Ogawa, 2016, p. 231). After the legal battles delayed the construction, the ODB moved forward and completed the project in 2016, almost ten years after it started (Nishibu, 2023, p. 33). Activists still oppose the helipads in Yambaru and call for the total return of the land occupied by the NTA, but the movement has significantly demobilized since the completion of the helipad construction (Interview with Japanese Researcher, 28 June 2022).

At its peak, the movement against the construction of the helipads in the Yambaru Forest (and for the return of the NTA) faced two major issues. First, the Japanese and US

governments had already agreed on a plan to return part of the NTA and relocate MCAS Futenma to Henoko on the condition that more helipads would be built in Yambaru. Both governments would be reticent to make major changes to that plan once it was in motion. Second, the Japanese and international media largely ignored what was happening in Yambaru (Ogawa, 2016; Interview with Japanese Activist, 13 May 2022). The movement in Takae and its clashes with the ODB were overlooked by mainland Japanese media (Ogawa, 2016, p. 230). Part of the underreporting about Takae was partially that 'national media primarily refers to central government pronouncements and policies in the context of the US alliance' (Ogawa, 2016, p. 230). The other issue was that attention on anti-US-military resistance was primarily focused on the movement against the construction in Henoko (Kim, 2021b, p. 118; Ogawa, 2016, p. 230). Even in Okinawa, 'the lack of publicity [made] Takae an afterthought even for many of those committed to anti-base activism' (Kim, 2021b, p. 118). In addition to competing with other movements for attention, activists in Takae have to contend with the fact that since the helipads have been constructed, the US has returned part of the NTA, as promised (Yoshida, 2021, p. 120). Unsurprisingly, 'the allies have touted the partial return of the [NTA] a major achievement in alleviating the burden on the heavily militarized island' (Kim, 2021b, p. 118).

UNESCO recognition of Yambaru Forest

Despite the completion of the helipads' construction and other obstacles that activists in Takae faced, they were presented with an opportunity to raise public awareness again about the continuity of the US military presence in Yambaru Forest: Yambaru's bid for UNESCO recognition. In early 2017, the year after the final helipads were completed and the US returned half of the NTA-occupied land, the Japanese Ministry of Environment (MOE) submitted nominations for the Yambaru Forest (termed Northern Okinawa in the nomination dossier) to UNESCO and the IUCN (along with three other sites) as a natural heritage site (Nishibu, 2023, pp. 33–34; Yoshikawa, 2019, pp. 1–2). The IUCN, an organization with both state and non-state members, consults with and advises UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee to identify and monitor natural heritage sites (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972). However, the Japanese MOE neglected to mention the NTA in its submissions to UNESCO and the IUCN (Yoshikawa, 2019, p. 2).

The presence of the NTA challenged the potential for UNESCO and the IUCN to approve Yambaru's nomination primarily because the site in Yambaru was adjacent to both what remained of the NTA and the newly constructed helipads. The quotidian activities that the US military conducts in these areas, such as those involving MV-22 Osprey or other aircraft, continued to damage the environment through noise pollution and created the potential for 'incidents and accidents' (Yoshikawa, 2017b). Additionally, Yoshikawa Hideki, the director of the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project (OEJP), wrote in a letter to the US military, "the return of 4,000 hectares of the training area [. . .] is likely to result in intensification of the impact of training on the environment, as the U.S. military claims that 'the same level of training is now conducted in a smaller region' (Yoshikawa, 2017b). As one interviewee articulated, the UNESCO designation and the US military in Yambaru Forest 'cannot co-exist:' 'do you want to see the mountain [in Yambaru Forest] with a US helicopter?' (Interview with Japanese Researcher,

28 June 2022). An activist in Takae expressed a similar sentiment, stating that an Osprey helicopter flying over the forest was a contradiction (Interview with Okinawan Activist, 5 December 2022). In short, the continued presence of the US military in Yambaru would degrade the environment (going against UNESCO's and IUCN's missions) and undermine Yambaru's appeal as a tourist site if granted World Heritage status.

Environmental groups, including the OEJP, the Informed Public Project (IPP), the Okinawa Environmental Network (OEN), and Friends of the Earth Japan (FoE Japan), appealed to UNESCO and the IUCN, highlighting the environmental impact of the NTA on Yambaru Forest (Nishibu, 2023, p. 33; Yoshida, 2021, p. 121; Yoshikawa, 2019, p. 4). Activists leveraged UNESCO's international framework to raise awareness, emphasizing that 'Japan cannot refuse international pressure' (Interview with Okinawan Activist, 31 July 2019). Another activist noted that pursuing World Heritage designation was a strategy to highlight military-related issues (Interview with Okinawan Activist, 5 December 2022).

Other Okinawan activists have employed similar transnational strategies regarding US bases in Okinawa. For example, activists against the expansion of the US's military presence in Henoko filed a lawsuit in US court to try to hold the US military accountable to its own laws to stop the base construction (Kim, 2021a). Similar to the Yambaru case, some activists have appealed to international Indigenous discourse and law to try to pressure the Japanese and US governments to return base-occupied land to the Okinawans, based on the UN's recognition of Okinawans as an Indigenous group (Yokota, 2015, pp. 55–56).[3] It is therefore unsurprising that Okinawan activists would adopt transnational strategies to address the issue of the NTA, given the connectivity between activists within and outside of Okinawa (Davis, 2017a).

Environmental organizations provided the IUCN and UNESCO with a variety of information about the NTA, including their own recommendations. First, they pointed out that the Japanese government's nomination dossier contained very little information about the NTA at all (Yoshikawa, 2017a, p. 1). Furthermore, it did not contain the information that the US government provided the Japanese government about the impact of the NTA on the local environment and the US military's efforts to address it (Yoshikawa, 2017a, p. 2). Second, activists provided information about the NTA, including the US military's use of the facility, the presence of endangered endemic species in the area, and the negative impact of the US facility on the environment (Yoshikawa, 2017a, p. 1). Third, activists emphasized that the US military has exclusive control over the US bases in Okinawa including the NTA and as such, 'it is unknown whether and how the US military's exclusive control over NTA affects the Japanese government's management of [Yambaru Forest] as a WNH site' (Yoshikawa, 2017a, p. 1). Finally, the environmental organizations made a variety of recommendations to the IUCN and UNESCO including asking the Japanese government to provide information from the US military about its environmental management efforts in the nomination dossier, requesting both governments to participate in the nomination process of Yambaru, and to consult with residents, environmental CSOs, and scientists when evaluating the site (Yoshida, 2021, p. 121; Yoshikawa, 2017a, p. 2).

The CSOs' efforts prompted the IUCN to recommend that the Japanese government defer the nomination process in 2018 (Yoshida, 2021, p. 122). After its evaluation of the four sites and receiving the dossier submitted by the Japanese government, it found that the sites would meet the World Heritage criterion for 'Biodiversity' if it

contained the returned NTA land (making the proposed area more congruous) (Ministry of the Environment Government of Japan, n.d.-b). Additionally, the IUCN recommended that Japan needed to develop its coordination with the US government regarding the remaining NTA (Ministry of the Environment Government of Japan, n.d.-b).

The IUCN's recommendation surprised the Japanese government (IUCN defers site spanning Kagoshima and Okinawa nominated for Natural World Heritage status, 2018). Although the IUCN's request touched upon a politically sensitive topic for Japan (the US bases), the Japanese government pledged to 'begin anew immediately' with a revised nomination dossier (Japan drops bid for World Heritage listing of southwest islands, 2018). Perhaps most indicative of the importance of the UNESCO designation to the Japanese government was the emphasis placed on getting the IUCN to recommend inscription after submitting a revised dossier. For example, Japan's Minister of the Environment, Harada Yoshiaki, stated that '*kesshite shippai wa yurusa renai*' ('failure cannot be tolerated') regarding the resubmission of the dossier (Harada, 2018). Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide similarly stated that 'we'll make the utmost efforts so that the islands will be inscribed on the UNESCO list without fail' (Japan to Recommend Again Amami-Okinawa Isles as World Heritage, 2018).

At the encouragement of the IUCN, the Japanese government revised its nomination dossier in 2019 and included part of the land formerly occupied by the NTA, as well as information about the NTA (Ministry of the Environment Government of Japan, n.d.-b). The revised dossier contained information about US-Japan cooperation about the NTA and parts of 'the U.S. Marine Corps' *Integrated Natural Resources and Cultural Resources Management Plan 2014* (INRCRMP)' (Yoshikawa & Kawamura, 2019), which had not previously been public. As Yoshikawa (2019) notes, 'the inclusion of such information [. . .] in the new dossier is significant. The Japanese government is extremely reluctant to disclose information relating to the U.S. bases in Japan in any form' (6). However, the revised dossier continued to leave out some details about the returned area of the NTA, such as spent ammunition and other military waste (Yoshikawa, 2019, p. 7; Yoshikawa & Kawamura, 2019, p. 2).

After reviewing Japan's amended nomination dossier and evaluating the Yambaru site, the World Heritage Committee inscribed Yambaru Forest as a WNH site in 2021 (Four natural and three cultural sites added to UNESCO's World Heritage List, 2021). For environmental activists, this designation is a double-edged sword. Some activists were disappointed by UNESCO and IUCN's decision to proceed with the inscription, viewing it as the organizations overlooking the problems with the US military presence in Yambaru (Email with Okinawan Activist, 13 June 2022). The public questioned how much the Japanese government had surveyed and cleaned up the area, as most of the returned NTA land was included in the Yambaru World Heritage site (Nishibu, 2023, p. 34; Yoshida, 2021, p. 120). Some also questioned the extent of IUCN's investigation of the site, as its 2020/2021 evaluation cited a variety of future challenges, excluding the NTA and other problems related to the US military's presence (Yoshida, 2021, p. 122). One activist working to raise awareness about the issues with the NTA captured this sentiment by referring to the UNESCO designation as a form of 'green washing;' the UNESCO designation 'works as a way to cover issues of waste and water contamination from the US military' (Interview with Japanese Activist, 3 June 2022).

Other activists view Yambaru's WNH status as a boon for the movement against the NTA. One activist involved with contacting UNESCO and the IUCN stated that 'I think the inscription of the Yambaru Forest as a WNH site has opened up many venues to challenge the NTA [. . .] collaborating with World Heritage Watch and submitting a counter-report to UNESCO are examples of such new venues' (Email with Okinawan Activist, 13 June 2022). Similarly, another activist stated the inscription facilitated more discussion about the issues with the NTA (Interview with Okinawan Activist, 9 March 2023). Additionally, some felt that the recognition proves how important Yambaru is because of its biodiversity (Interview with Okinawan Activist, 5 December 2022. Thus, while environmental organizations' efforts did not ultimately change the status of the US military in Yambaru Forest, they may have created another way that activists can leverage international pressure in the future.

Conclusion

The Yambaru Forest's UNESCO bid offers a nuanced example of how activists navigate the intersection of national identity and image, international platforms, and state-driven processes to advance their causes. Environmental organizations in Okinawa have had difficulty in gaining concessions from the Japanese government. As such, activists appealed to IGOs vis-à-vis Japan's bid for UNESCO recognition for the Yambaru Forest in addition to other transnational strategies. Unlike previous CSO to IGO connections discussed in the transnational activism literature (Zajak, 2017, pp. 132–133), the use of UNESCO recognition is unique in that it is a state-led process; without Japan opening the proverbial door vis-à-vis Yambaru's UNESCO bid, this channel would not have been available to activists. Okinawan activists leveraged this state-driven nomination process to draw attention to the environmental consequences of the US military presence in the forest. By informing UNESCO and the IUCN about the NTA, environmental activists tried to show that the Japanese government had omitted vital information: the presence of the NTA. I argue that while this may be a blow to any state's national image and identity, it was especially problematic for Japan, as it has cultivated its image as a global environmental leader over several decades, using international platforms like UNESCO to reinforce this identity. Ultimately, the activists' gambit was unsuccessful in that UNESCO designated Yambaru as a WNH site despite the unresolved environmental issues surrounding the NTA. This case underscores the broader implications of using state-led international mechanisms for activism. It demonstrates how a state's nation branding strategies and national identity can create opportunities for incremental victories, even within restrictive frameworks.

This case also raises questions about social movement 'success' as conceptualized as a movement meeting its end goal. While many anti-US-military movements have been unsuccessful in meeting broad goals like removing all US bases in their country (Kawato, 2015; Yeo, 2011), many have also been successful at meeting intermediate goals and winning some concessions from the US and their governments (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, 2018; McCaffrey, 2002; Na'puti & Bevacqua, 2015; Vine, 2019). In this case, activists' efforts led to the Japanese government publicly disclosing previously private information about the nature of US-Japan cooperation regarding the NTA, as well as the US military's plan to manage natural resources in host countries.

UNESCO recognition has permanently cast Yambaru in the international spotlight and may provide future leverage to opponents of the US military in Okinawa. CSOs can attempt to hold the Japanese government accountable to the conventions underlying UNESCO's protection of cultural and natural heritage, agreements that the Japanese government itself signed. The 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage enumerates states' obligations to protect UNESCO-recognized cultural or natural heritage (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972). Calling attention to states' violations of international agreements to which they are a party not only draws unwanted attention to violators, but also pressures the IGOs and their members into taking action against the target. If, for example, there is evidence of base-related environmental pollution or accidents at or near the WNH site, activists can lobby UNESCO and the IUCN and credibly argue that Japan (and/or the US) has not protected this site. Indeed, activists have already cited concerns with the WNH designation and the environmental impacts of the NTA on the site (Yoshikawa & Kawamura, 2019). Thus, Yambaru will remain in the international spotlight for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. Approval for this research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University at Albany (SUNY) before conducting the study (Protocol 19X140). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants mentioned in this manuscript; their names have been anonymized to protect their privacy.
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
3. For more on the politics on Okinawans' Indigenous status, see also Nishiyama (2023).

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Appendix

Interviewees

The interviews were conducted between July 2019 to June 2023, both in Japan and remotely over Zoom. Below are brief descriptions of the interviewees and locations. Please note that activists' group affiliations are not included to preserve their anonymity.

- Japanese researcher, interviewed on June 28, 2022 in Tokyo: this researcher is an expert on Japanese and US policy about the US bases in Japan, including those within Okinawa. I interviewed this researcher in person in July 2019 as well as June 2022.
- Japanese activist, interviewed on May 13, 2022 in Tokyo: this activist resides in the Tokyo area and is involved with anti-base activism in Tokyo. They are also part of an organization based in Tokyo that focuses on the helipad issue in Takae, Okinawa.
- Okinawan activist, interviewed on December 5, 2022 over Zoom: this activist is originally from Kyoto but currently lives in Okinawa and has been involved with several Okinawan organizations that work on anti-US-base issues.
- Okinawan activist, interviewed on July 31, 2019 in Okinawa: this activist is a key figure in Okinawan environmental activism, with a focus on environmental issues related to the US base presence. This is the same activist with whom I had email correspondence on June 13, 2022.
- Japanese activist, interviewed on June 2, 2022 in Tokyo: this activist, a colleague of the activist interviewed on May 13, 2022, resides in the Tokyo area and is primarly involved with an organization based in Tokyo that focuses on the helipad issue in Takae, Okinawa.
- Okinawan activist, interviewed on March 9, 2023 over Zoom: this activist is originally from Kyoto but currently lived in Okinawa and has been involved with several Okinawan organizations that work on anti-US-base issues. They have also worked with the Tokyo-based group that focuses on the helipad issue in Takae, Okinawa.