

Fear and Hope: The Henoko Base and the Future of Oura Bay 恐れと希望 辺野古の基地と大浦湾の未来

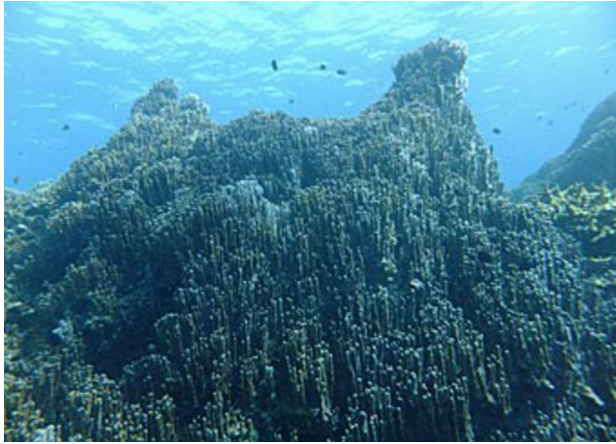
Katherine Muzik

On a sunny September day, last year, I tumbled from a diving boat into the bright clear blue sea of Henoko's Oura Bay, feeling both fear and hope. Would the corals living there still be fine, as they had been during my previous visits in years past? Or would they and other marine life here be suffering and dying from various negative impacts of human behavior (toxic runoff, sedimentation, garbage, ocean acidification, global warming, overfishing, etc.) which are steadily and inexorably killing coral reefs all around the world?

As I breathed through my SCUBA regulator, and peered through my mask, slowly descending, my worries vanished. I saw waving red sea fans, a resplendent school of silvery Fusiliers, the Okinawan Prefectural fish, and countless beautiful and healthy corals. I was filled with joy! I felt I had returned to the seas of my childhood! I swam like a turtle, slowly down and around a huge colony of *Porites*, over 7 meters tall, a huge golden colony, with no blemish at all. I admired its perfection with gratitude, and then kicked my feet to swim happily through Oura's expansive cathedrals of blue coral, to see my other old coral friends, at the so-called "Coral Museum", many at least 5,000 years old. (Blue coral, *Heliopora coerulea*, has been declared by CITES to be a vulnerable species, on its way to extinction. Here at Oura it is fine!)

clams, everything fine as far as I could see. Meanwhile above in the boat, awaiting me were my Okinawan friends, Nakasone the captain and Iha, a retired high school chemistry teacher. Guiding me was another friend, the expert diver, Makishi. I was snugly embraced by a SCUBA harness borrowed from friends at local Snack Snufkin divers. What happiness! I was honored that these friends and others had invited me to visit, to help them explain to the world, how important the corals of Oura Bay are. Can't everyone understand how unique and diverse this Bay is? It is miraculously healthy. There are thousands of species living here: over 420 species of coral, 1,040 species of fish, 403 species of algae and seagrasses, of sea 1,974 mollusks (including 120 kinds of sea slugs) and 753 crustaceans. More species inhabit the associated mountains, forests, rivers, mangroves, and tidal flats! Many are new to science and still undescribed. Feeling ecstatic, I returned to the blue sky above, but, oh no, there was an American military ship hovering nearby the dive boat. I was again filled with worry and fear. From our boat, I could see long red floats, marking the area near shore where exploratory drilling had already begun, despite the appalling absence of an official Environmental Impact Survey. The dugongs have fled, but the corals and seaweeds cannot move away. They will surely perish if we cannot stop construction.

I felt so safe. I had healthy corals all around me, fish, crabs, sea anemones, sea cucumbers,



Coral in Oura Bay

Besides diving at Oura, during my 10-day visit to Okinawa in September, I sang my Waterdrop song in Japanese with children gathered at Sedake beach in Oura. I rallied with elderly and youthful protestors at the gate at Henoko's Camp Schwab, and with more protestors at Takae, still defiant, daily, against Ospreys there. I participated in two Symposia, one at Okidai (Okinawa University) with former Okidai President Sakurai and Architect Makishi, and one in Nago with Nago Mayor Inamine, held a press conference in Naha with the Governor's team, and finally, as I left Japan, another one in Tokyo at the Parliament, with Itokazu Keiko, Okinawa's Diet Member.

Why did I agree to travel all the way from Kaua'i to Okinawa to dive at Oura Bay? Coral reefs all around the world are in great peril. They are dying in the Florida Keys, in the Arabian seas of Oman, at the Great Barrier Reef. (As a Marine Biologist, I have studied corals in Florida, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Belize, Barbados, Mexico, Florida, Kenya, Fiji, the Philippines, New Caledonia, Australia, Tahiti, Hawaii, Japan and Okinawa, and therefore am acutely aware of their decline.) When I lived in Okinawa, during 1981 to 1988, I dived from

Amami Oshima down to Yonaguni, and I was shocked to discover that even then, most of the coral reefs of the Ryukyu Archipelago were dead or dying.

When I returned to Okinawa to live there again, thirty years later, from 2007 to 2011, I was further saddened. Even more of the island has been over-developed and paved with cement, and thus, the remaining life nearby in the sea is even more threatened by man's activities on land. To destroy Oura's unique and remarkable reef purposefully, to obliterate it, which will certainly happen with the current US-Japan military-industrial plan, is simply, not acceptable. The 3.5 million truckloads of fill to be brought there will not only destroy the place from where it is removed, the fill will block and change Oura Bay's incoming life-giving currents. A quick calculation shows, an impossible 9,589 trucks per day every day for a year, or about 959 trucks a day for ten years, destroying the reef and bringing dust and noise and more CO₂ pollution. Again, not acceptable! It breaks my heart to see videos of my old friends lying (perhaps even pushed by police) on the highway pavement outside Camp Schwab gates, and protesting from boats, risking arrest and their lives, to avert this tragedy.

I fear that Abe and Obama have forgotten compassion and history. Their actions are not helping to end racism, militarism and extreme materialism, the giant triplet of societal and environmental destruction. They are ignoring the facts: the Oura Coral Reef Ecosystem is the last intact one in Japan! 80% of Okinawans are against the military airport construction at Oura! In November, Onaga, running for Governor on an anti-base platform, and anti-base Mayor Shiroma of Naha, were both elected by landslides! Although this US military Base is purportedly part of Obama's plan to

"contain China", also in November the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, warned that empires always fail, that disputes must be resolved peacefully! With eighty percent of the Japanese population voicing opposition to the bases, the LDP suffered major setbacks in the Okinawa election. Nineteen different Japanese scientific societies have now publicly added their support to protect the life of Oura!

So yes I have fear, but I also have hope. My Uchinanchu (Okinawan word for Okinawan!) friends are indomitable. I salute their tenacity, awareness, and political savvy. As a democracy, Okinawans have the right to choose. For example, they can choose to exchange a Marine Base for a Marine Sanctuary! Yes! They can choose to perpetuate peace, not conflict, to perpetuate conservation, study and jobs in ecotourism for local students, scientists and fishermen. Instead of Harm, let's choose Harmony! Together we might be able to continue to keep this fabulous ecosystem safe. Together we will help protect the rare and endangered blue coral, the dugong, the Okinawan rail, and Pryer's Woodpecker. We will speak for the fishes, seaweeds, seafans and clams!

I take great hope from my steadfast Uchinanchu, who now, in January 2015, continue to protest the US-Japanese military

activities, as I remember the words of Rachel Carson in her book, "Sense of Wonder":

"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."

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