

Shiretoko World Heritage Site and the Northern Territories Issue

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Recommendations at the time of Shiretoko World Heritage registration

Shiretoko was inscribed as Japan's third Natural World Heritage site in 2005. At that time, the IUCN, which was in charge of the review process, pointed out clear and apparent similarities between the environment and ecology in Shiretoko and the neighbouring islands. "Should it be possible for the States Parties to agree to promote the conservation of these properties in the future, there may be the potential for development of these properties as a wider 'World Heritage Peace Park.'"²

The neighboring islands to Shiretoko peninsula, Kunashiri and Iturup, are Japanese territory and effectively governed by Russia ever since the end of the second world war. Even if they were to be expanded, consultation with Russia would mean recognizing Russia's effective control.

Cooperation with Russia was also the request of local fishers. Walleye pollack, an important fishery resource, is caught by both Japan and Russia. The Shiretoko World Heritage Site Scientific Committee plan that, Japanese and Russian scientists have a relationship of trust and will share their mutual understanding of pollock, including informal information. Based on the shared scientific data, effective resource management measures can be proposed to each country. There are things that can be done without officially sharing information and achieving an international management plan among governments. The recommendation at the time of the Shiretoko World Heritage registration could be a basis for promoting it.

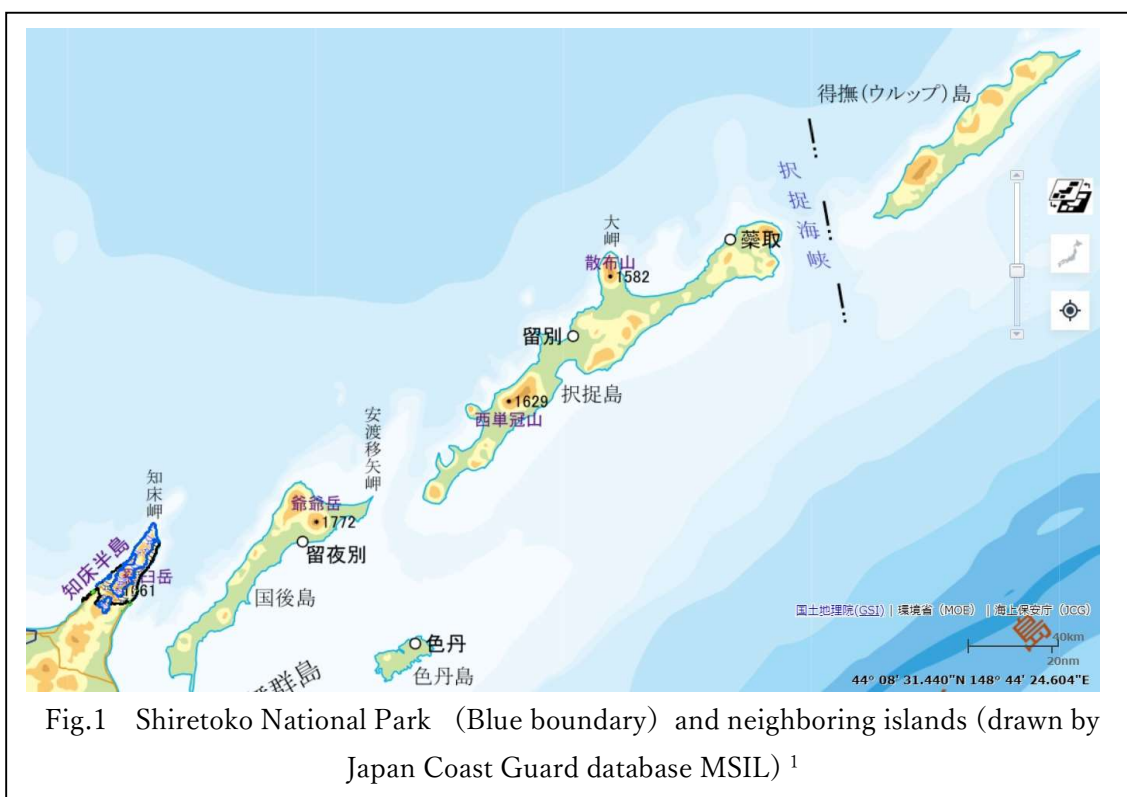
On the other hand, there were fears that the recommendation would damage diplomatic relations. It was reported that the original IUCN draft recommendation stated the extension to the "Southern Kuril Islands." This was an expression meaning that the islands were Russian territory, a description that the Japanese side could not tolerate. However, it was revised by the expression "neighboring islands."

Earlier, in January 2001, UNESCO MAB (Man and the Biosphere) Programme and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) co-hosted a workshop on "Nature Conservation Cooperation on the Kunashiri, Iturup, Shikotan and the Habomai Islands" in Tokyo, where a joint resolution was adopted. Valery Neronov

¹ This is originally written in Japanese, published in "Global Net" in 2022, translated into English for the author's personal use

² http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory_body_evaluation/1193.pdf

of Russia called for the four northern islands to be designated as a new biosphere reserve

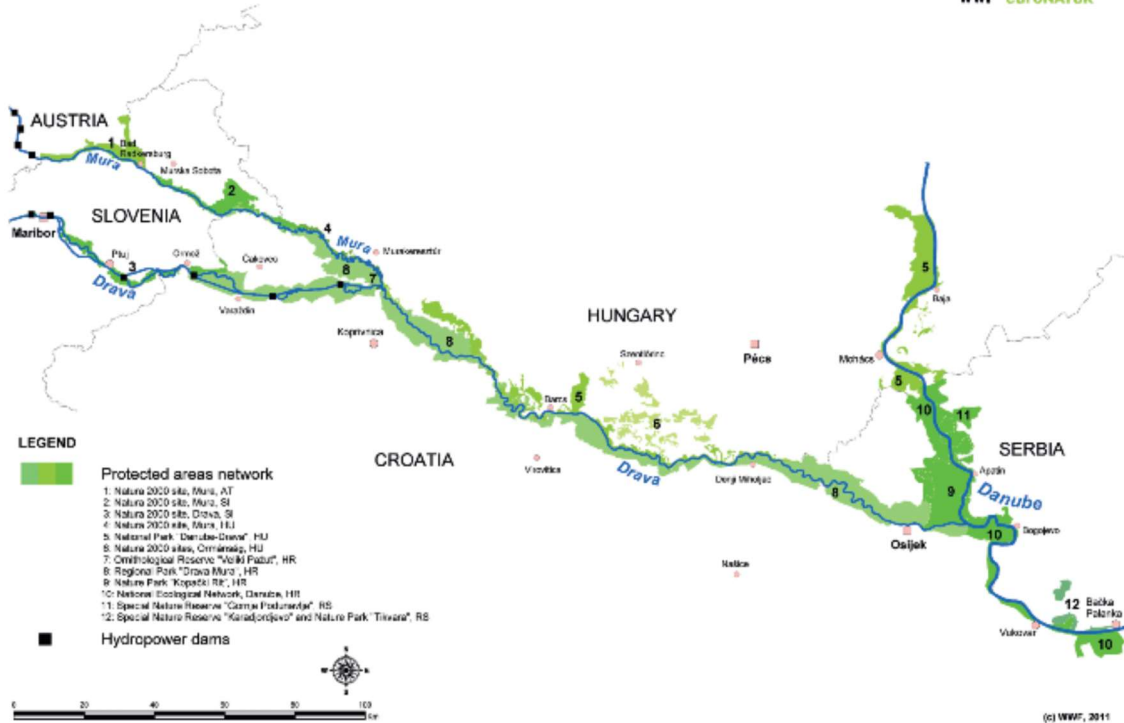


under a joint Japan-Russia agreement.

Some Japanese also have opinions that the Shiretoko World Heritage Site should be expanded. According to "Shiretoko and the Four Northern Islands" by N. Otaishi and H. Honma (published by Iwanami), it is possible to register the islands, including the territorial waters of both Japan and Russia, by including Urup Island, the northern neighbor of Iturup Island (Fig. 1i).

The Mura-Drava-Danube Transboundary Biosphere Reserve (MDD-TBR), designated in 2021, is a transboundary site that spans Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia. This historic border causes still dispute between Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia. Although there are many examples of rivers giving as borders, rivers change their course over time, and current rivers do not always coincide with borders. It can be a source of dispute as to when a river channel becomes a border. Nevertheless, it is in the common interest of each country to conserve the biosphere of its watershed area, and this can only be done through cooperation among countries. On the other hand, rivers have also been subject to development, such as hydroelectric dams. In the MDD-TBR, environmental NGOs continued their efforts to conserve watershed ecosystems and realized a transboundary protected area.

Trans-Boundary River System of the Mura, Drava and Danube



Protected areas network in Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers (Bloesch, 2012)

The Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve, which UNESCO designated in 2021, is a transboundary site among Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia, and also includes an unsolved border area. Peace Park from Shiretoko to Urup may not be entirely impossible.

Northern Territories Visa-Free Research Exchange

Russia allows visa-free travel to former residents of the Northern Territories approximately every year since 1992. Field research accompanied with Russian scientists is also permitted without visa. Such an exchange that has made it possible to envision the collaboration of Japanese and Russian scientists in the scientific evaluation of pollock resources and the endangered Steller's sea lion population, as well as the expansion of the World Heritage Site in a concrete manner.

In response to the above recommendation for registration of the Shiretoko World Heritage Site, Japan-Russia Cooperation Workshop on Ecosystem Conservation in Adjacent Areas has been held since 2009 based on an agreement between the governments of Japan and Russia.

Apart from these, the Amur-Okhotsk Consortium has been organized under the

auspices of a research project by the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, which regards the ecosystem of the Amur River basin, which supports the rich primary productivity of the Sea of Okhotsk, as a "giant fish-breeding forest". At the international workshop, a joint statement was agreed upon to strengthen cooperation and information sharing between Japanese, Chinese, and Russian scientists in order to elucidate the relationship between the Amur River Basin ecosystem and the Sea of Okhotsk. It is valuable that Japanese ecologists and oceanographers with experience in field research in both China and Russia, where there are many constraints, are building a network together with their counterparts in Chinese and Russia.

Shiretoko World Heritage Site Expansion and Territorial Issues

The expansion of the Shiretoko World Heritage Site is a separate issue from the campaign for the return of the Northern Territories. The significance of the ecological continuity of the Shiretoko and neighboring islands as an integral part of the future was pointed out by the IUCN, and this is a separate issue from the territorial dispute. There is the issue of Japan's territorial claims and Russia's effective control of the Shiretoko Islands, but just as visa-free exchange is carried out of humanitarian considerations, it can be said that Japan has gained a cause in some way with Russia to conserve the ecosystem of Shiretoko and its neighboring islands. Conversely, this issue should not be intertwined with territorial disputes, but should speak to a cause that transcends the national interests of both sides.

UNESCO respects the will of its member countries. It should not intertwine the issue with the campaign for territorial restitution, but should welcome the promotion of joint surveys and joint management, while acknowledging that the area is a disputed territory.

In 2003, the Ecological Society of Japan sent a letter of opinion to the Senkaku Islands demanding that measures be taken against goats released on the islands, which it claimed were damaging vegetation. China and Taiwan have also claimed territorial rights to the islands, but as an academic group aware of the ecological crisis in the region, they expressed their opinion without discernment of the unknown political consequences it could have (however, the submission was addressed to the Japanese government). Subsequently, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government planned to purchase the Senkaku Islands, which were privately owned, and conducted a survey of the goats in 2012. The government of Japan purchased the land and nationalized the islands in September 2012, but this may have added to the international confusion.

Science diplomacy and trans-boundary heritage

Science diplomacy is a concept that includes advancing diplomatic issues based on scientific knowledge in addition to deepening scientific exchanges through diplomacy and, conversely, building friendly relations through scientific exchanges. A typical example is the agreement between the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries on transboundary pollution control in the acid rain issue.

Scientific knowledge does not always promote peace and friendship, but if scientists act not for the sake of their own national interests, but for the sake of scientific truth and human prosperity, scientific knowledge can contribute to the solution of overlooked problems, such as the acid rain problem, shared by scientists in both countries. In the real world of international relations, there is a fear that this could sometimes be politically counterproductive. But we cannot put a lid on the truth. When in doubt, it is the role of the scientist to express his or her opinion from a standpoint that is separate from the national interest, without regard for the consequences.

ⁱ Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (GSI), Ministry of Environment (MOE)

https://www.msil.go.jp/msil/htm/main.html?centerx%3D145.43761968749735%26centery%3D44.973950987539865%26cacheLevel%3D8%26BaseMap%3D1%26VisibleLayers%3Dm419_1_100_1_1%26Lang%3D0%26BaseMap2%3D1%26VisibleLayers2%3D%26active%3D0%26polarId%3D1