

Prospects for Ainu Management of Ainu Cultural Heritage and Landscape: A Proposed Collaboration with the Nibutani Community, Biratori, Hokkaido, Japan

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Statement Prepared for the IPinCH Case Study Workshop, October 2010



In Japan, the framework for cultural heritage management has almost exclusively been directed to preserving and promoting the common heritage of the Japanese nation state, with little recognition of the heritage interests of specific ethnic groups there, such as the Ainu. On the other hand, interest by communities in local historical cultural heritage is very high, and both archaeological and historical information and objects are much valued in the regional communities.

As is now well known, on 6 June 6th, 2008, the Japanese Diet [Parliament] adopted “a resolution for the Ainu as an indigenous people,” by which means the Japanese Government officially recognized the Ainu as the Indigenous peoples of the Japanese archipelago. This new and major change marks a vital turning point in the relationship between the Ainu and Japan, with the hope for more equitable approaches to the preservation and management of historical cultural heritage in Japan. At the present time, however, there are many unresolved issues pertaining to the management of archaeological and historic resources in Hokkaido, part of the traditional territory of the Ainu. The debate thus continues over the Ainu people’s role in managing their own heritage.

In this report we discuss the preservation and management plan for the historical cultural heritage within the traditional territory of the Ainu community in the Biratori-town, Hokkaido, and on the need for and more effective research practices. Our focus is on three aspects of this Ainu community’s heritage: 1) Indigenous rights and traditional knowledge surveys in the Saru River valley; 2) Preserving Ainu heritage and cultural landscapes locally; and 3) the role of archaeology in extending knowledge of Ainu cultural heritage.

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1. Indigenous Rights and Traditional Knowledge Surveys in the Saru River Valley

Nibutani, in the Saru River valley, is a very important place for the Ainu communities of Hokkaido. We have chosen the Nibutani community for our proposed case study because it has had a central role in the Ainu Indigenous rights movement since the 1990s.

The first turning point for the Ainu was an amendment to the River Law in 1997. Two important points were incorporated into this amendment: 1) respect for the environment; and 2) respect for community opinion and autonomy. Since the amendment was put into effect, there has been an emphasis on hearing from the community in the process of implementing government policy. Two other important developments related to the Ainu took place at this time. The first was the establishment of an Act promoting “the Ainu culture and dissemination and enlightenment of knowledge about Ainu tradition, etc. (May 8, 1997). The second was the decision made by the Sapporo District Court in the “Nibutani Dam Case” (March 27, 1997). This decision is remarkable in that the court recognized the cultural rights of the Ainu and their status as an Indigenous people of Japan in advance of the official government decision.

In response to these developments, the Saru Basin Committee was established and developed the “Saru River Development Plan,” which is concerned with the promotion, transmission and preservation of Ainu culture. In addition, Biratori-town decided to start a three-year survey of its lands as a means to identify and conserve the Ainu cultural landscape and traditional ecological knowledge associated with it. The results of this project were published in March 2006.

Our project on community-based heritage research will assist the Nibutani in addressing their needs in ways that include: 1) the participation of Ainu people and local community members; 2) the creative cooperation between Ainu and other interested parties (that is, learning from specialists but also educating specialists); 3) developing ways to educate the public about Ainu culture; and 4) the use of the Ainu concept of *Ukouk* (“link”) in promoting and preserving heritage. This project will help the community determine how best to develop and use the extensive information (traditional ecological knowledge) on the Nibutani environment and heritage sites that has been collected by the Biratori-town survey, a database that is the first of its kind in Hokkaido.

2. Preserving Ainu Heritage and Cultural Landscapes Locally

“Landscape” is an integral part of local cultures. Often, however, cultural heritage items such as artifacts have been taken from the community lands and become the property of universities and museums. The Ainu believe that these materials should remain in the space (landscape) where they were created and used. The Ainu cultural landscape contains many important places important to their heritage, including *chinomishiri* (“the place we pray for”), *chashi* (“sacred place”), and many named locations, none of which can be adequately represented or respected in museum exhibits. It is difficult to understand fully the Ainu culture without understanding the deep relationship between their cultural heritage and their spiritual culture.

The cultural environmental report on traditional ecological knowledge developed in March 2006 by Biratori-town (mentioned above) demonstrates how deeply cultural heritage is tied to the landscape. Community members have been investigating the heritage information that has

been collected and are able to link some cultural resources to the history of local families. It seems extremely important to ensure that Ainu cultural heritage remain in the local community in the future, where it can best be preserved and managed. The importance of this location is reflected by the fact that the “Traditional Ainu Cultural Landscape of the Saru River valley” was recognized as an “Important Cultural Landscape” by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2007.

3. The Role of Archaeology in Extending Knowledge of Ainu Cultural Heritage

In conducting historical research we cannot depend entirely upon the written materials for recognizing and evaluating the cultural heritage and long history of the indigenous Ainu. The nature of material culture is often directly tied to the local natural surroundings and the landscape. Archaeology is an effective tool for exploring this material culture and the ancient societies it represents. However, if such research is conducted only by the experts (that is, Japanese archaeologists), this can be considered an exploitation of the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of the Ainu communities. Involving the descendants is today an important consideration in heritage preservation and making sure that the local communities benefit from such research. It thus becomes necessary to develop research model that encourage collaboration between the experts and local community members.

A movement has recently begun that promotes research of the Ainu culture by Ainu people, and that seeks to preserve and use the traditional cultures and knowledge for the benefit of the Ainu people. The number of scholars who are Ainu people is still small, and there are yet no professional Ainu archaeologists. There is now an urgent need to train young researchers for the next generation through local heritage projects.