When the UNESCO World Heritage Designation was awarded to Japan for Shiretoko National Park in Hokkaido in 2005, representatives of the indigenous Ainu (Utari) expected to play a role in the preservation of this unique ecosphere, as called for in United Nations guidelines. However, both the application process and subsequent planning did not include consultation with organizations in Hokkaido that represent the Ainu people. While there are parallels in other countries of the world which have ignored the cultural and environmental role of indigenous peoples who previously inhabited national parks and natural areas, the lack of Ainu participation in the Shiretoko Peninsula management suggests that that the Japanese government continues to be insensitive to the peoples who inhabited Hokkaido before Japanese (wajin) settlement in the late 19th century.

This paper will draw upon published sources, consultation with both American and Japanese experts in Ainu studies, and on-site visits to the Shiretoko Peninsula and other Ainu sites in the summer of 2008.1

The Land: Shiretoko World Heritage Designation

Today there are 878 World Heritage sites, 679 cultural, 174 natural, and 25 mixed sites worthy of international recognition and protection. Japan has many cultural sites reflecting its long and rich history of human achievement, but only three natural sites. Two were recognized in 1993: the island of Yakushima south of Kyushu and the mountain beech forests of Shirakami-Sanchi in northern Honshu. In 2005 the remote Shiretoko Peninsula in Northeast Hokkaido was added. It is considered by some to be the largest “wilderness” area left in Japan. Certainly the extreme climate and remoteness of the peninsula has helped preserve the natural environment more than other regions of Japan, yet it has also been a source of food for many centuries: human remains date back at least 8,000 years, and experts suggest Ainu culture in Hokkaido, the Kuriles, and northern Honshu appears in the 13th century.

In the last century the growing demands of an industrializing Japan made new resource demands for forest and mineral products throughout the archipelago, and traditional fishing grounds were also been heavily exploited. Japanese (wajin) merchants were attracted by the resources of Hokkaido in the 15th century. Shiretoko was rich in fisheries and furs. Mt. Iou (sulfur mountain) erupted in 1853 and shoreline sulfur mining began the next year. Later eruptions deposited pure sulphur in the Meiji period. An American geologist, Benjamin Lyman, was hired to study the deposits in 1873, and mining of sulfur in Shiretoko began in 1879. Molten sulphur eruptions occurred in 1889 and the last in 1936. Mining was discontinued in 1940.
However, compared to the rest of Japan, Shiretoko remained relatively untouched, which is why it contains today several rare bird and sea mammal species, as well as the largest remaining bear habitat in Japan. Its remote location and long winter season destroyed aspirations after WWI to establish farming similar to other regions of Hokkaido. For these reasons, the Shiretoko Peninsula was unique and deserving of World Heritage designation awarded in July 2005 at the UNESCO meeting in Durban, South Africa.

By American national park standards, the narrow peninsula is small: about 50 miles long and twenty-five miles wide, with an eroded mountain spine running down the middle. A two kilometer sea border is also included in the Natural World Heritage site. Most of the north coast consists of sharp cliffs with some streams falling into the ocean as waterfalls. Access is limited to one cross-peninsula road linking the small towns of Utoro and Rausu completed in 1980 and closed in the winter, and a short road on the north coast limited now to shuttle buses from a nature center, and a longer narrow road on the south coast lined with the weathered houses of fishermen and konbu (kelp) harvesters. It ends abruptly at a shingle beach. From road’s end fishing camps extend almost to the end of the peninsula.

Trails into the park are also limited. The most popular and overused “back country trail leads from a trailhead at Iwaobetsu hot springs near Utoro up to Rausu-dake, the highest peak in the park. The steady climb takes about four hours. A seldom-used extension continues south to the onsen at Rausu. Formerly it was possible to hike down the spine of the peninsula to the still active Iou-dake, camp overnight, and then descend to the popular Kamui Wakka hot springs waterfall otenburo that is the terminal of the shuttle bus route. However, the Japanese National Park system has made the trail down to the waterfalls off-limits.

The most popular site, because of its beauty and easy access for large tour bus groups, is the five lakes (Goto) area on the north side. Here one encounters a steady stream of tourists, with occasional groups guided by nature leaders. During the season 3-4,000 visitors line the crowded trails. The trails are often cordoned off when brown bears are sighted in the vicinity to lessen the chance of bear/human contact. Hikers and tourists are rather cautious and most attach bells to their clothing or walking sticks. Nonetheless, about a hundred human-bear encounters occur each year in the park.2

Including the bears and abundant Sika deer, there are 63 mammals and 271 birds in the park, including several endangered species. In the winter Shiretoko is the lowest latitude in the world where sea ice forms, and underneath is a large biomass of plankton that attracts fish such as salmon which in turn provide food for eagles and bears.3 It is a unique ecosystem, one that historically included an Ainu hunting-fishing-gathering component.
The People: Ainu Heritage

Pit dwelling remains dating back 2,000 years have been found on Cape Shiretoko. Remains of Okhotsk culture are found in northern Hokkaido extending between the 6th and 11th centuries, and Ainu culture in the Shiretoko region appears as late as the 13th century. Many animal and plant names derive from the Ainu language, as does the name Shiretoko, or “where the earth ends.” Edo explorers mapped the coastline. During the Tokugawa period the Matsue clan based in southern Hokkaido licensed Japanese merchants who exploited the rich maritime and forest resources as well as the Ainu peoples who were co-opted into destroying the traditional ecosystem they had depended on for centuries. Many died of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis.

After the Meiji Restoration, Japanese leaders renamed Ezo Hokkaido and took a much greater interest in this frontier region in fear that expanding Russian power would encroach on the new nation-state. By the 1880s the government was encouraging soldiers to settle in Hokkaido in the name of “development,” and the native Ainu were pushed aside. While much of southern and eastern Hokkaido became pasture and cropland, the climate of Shiretoko was not suitable for agriculture. Settlers who attempted to farm around Iwaobetsu in 1914 were defeated by 1925. In 1937 and again in 1949 there were attempts to clear forests, but after WWII it was realized that the natural heritage of the peninsula was more valuable than marginal cropland. Therefore, in 1964 Shiretoko became the twenty-second national park in Japan. As the value of the natural environment grew, both government and volunteer groups moved to purchase and reforest former agricultural land adjoining the park and now included in the expanded protected area.

When Japan began its application process for gaining World Heritage status for Shiretoko, little if any attention was paid to the historic role of the area as a traditional Ainu fishing and hunting ground. Indeed, although U.N. guidelines for inclusion include respect for the cultural as well as natural heritage, Ainu were not included in the planning, nor, at present, do they have a role in the future management of the park. Although there was mention of a possible Ainu role by UNESCO at the time of designation, the Japanese government claimed that no Ainu lived in the park area. Little has been done since then, in spite of the “Shiretoko World Treasure Declaration” signed by Governor of Hokkaido Takahashi Harumi and the mayors of Shari and Rausu on October 30, 2005 in honor of the newly won world natural heritage designation:

In order to responsibly hand down this world natural heritage to the next generation as a priceless asset of mankind, we, in unity together with the citizens of Hokkaido, hereby vow to make every effort towards proper use and conservation of this priceless world treasure, Shiretoko. At the same time, we will maintain the wisdom and skills that the region’s ancestors, the Ainu, have passed on through the generations as well as conserve the valuable history and remember what the land has provided us. [italics mine].

Ironically, while there is a debate and some consideration of the wisdom of reintroducing the wolf to the park, little discussion of introducing the Ainu heritage beyond a museum role in nearby Shari, and a section of the Hokkaido Museum of
Northern Peoples (Hokkaidoritsu Hoppo Minzoku Hakubutsukan) at Abashiri, north of Shari. In fact, the main theme of the exhibits in the Shiretoko Museum supported by the town of Shari, as gateway to the park, is the history of Japanese (wajin) settlement, farming, and urban history of Shari, the rail terminus nearest the park.

In February 2008 UNESCO sent a team to monitor progress in Shiretoko, spending four days in and around the park. Their report noted the need to extend protection of the declining Walleye Pollack and measures to protect the endangered Stellar Sea Lion from the nets and appetites (“consumptive uses”) of fishermen, suggesting the use of explosives might scare away the sea lions. Recommendation 14 of the report suggested a “consolidated ecotourism strategy” be formulated, but their formula contradictory measures: “…protection of the natural values of the property, the promotion of high quality nature based experiences for visitors, and the promotion of local economic development.”

While the Japanese state and its legal system has not been responsive to the needs or even the reality of the Ainu as an indigenous people, Ainu activists in recent decades have been active in legal challenges to state policy. Perhaps the most prominent in regards to Shiretoko is Professor Ono Yugo, a faculty member at the Graduate School of Environmental Earth Science, Hokkaido University. He has been critical of the lack of Ainu representation in the planning for the Shiretoko World Heritage designation, and in the subsequent management of planning for the park.

Although the application for World Heritage designation called for a management plan that would “study the culture of the Ainu people and the traditional wisdom and skills of the local residents in order to determine the methods to preserve, manage, and realize sustainable use of the natural environment,” Ainu representatives were not consulted. Ono argues that Ainu should be seated at the management table, including appropriate ecotourism activities that reflect Ainu culture and knowledge of the natural environment.

The mission was impressed “…by the strong commitment of stakeholders at all levels” to preservation, and the “…bottom up approach to management through the involvement of local communities and local stakeholders…” Accordingly, Ono was instrumental in organizing in April 2005 a non-profit organization based in Shari, the Shiretoko senshu minzoku ecotsuurizumu kenkyukai [Shiretoko Indigenous People’s Eco-Tourism Research Union (SIPETRU)] which promotes Ainu (senshu minzoku) ecotourism, including preservation of Ainu knowledge of the Shiretoko habitat. Hikes, performances, and crafts are encouraged.

However, there are numerous other tourist businesses that cater to both mass tourism and ecotourism that offer similar services. For example, Eco Tour Hokkaido offers many venues including two in the Shiretoko area for hikes with guides to “ecolando” Hokkaido. Most bus tours and big operators offer stops at the Goto Lakes site and also at Otaru harbor where two companies offer hourly trips along the northern coast to view the cliffs, waterfalls, birds, and occasional wildlife. From Rausu on the south
coast of the peninsula, a variety of boat trips are available for coastal bear-watching, including half-day trips to the tip of the peninsula. Supposedly off-limits, the lack of enforcement has allowed keen photographers access to the cape. On the other hand, accommodating the millions of tourist who now visit the park each year by coastal tour boats is a relatively benign way to offer access to “nature” to the masses. Hikers in large numbers have a much greater environmental impact on the natural environment of the park and risk bear encounters.

There are barriers to an increased role for the Ainu in managing natural areas once their hunting and fishing grounds. Much of the knowledge of plant and animal life has been lost, although Ainu organizations are trying to restore and maintain it, but today wajin naturalists at Hokkaido University and other institutions play a more important role, with their foreign counterparts, in “management” of the natural world (somewhat a non-sequitor). One example published in 2006 by the Shiretoko Nature Foundation is Sekai shizen isan Sjhiretoko to Eroosuton [Wildlife in Shiretoko and Yellowstone National Parks]. With chapters written by both Japanese (wajin) and American scientists, the Ainu are mentioned only in passing.13

Ono admits that lack of formal education is a pressing need for the Ainu who wish to take a stronger role in preservation and research. Traditionally denied access to good schools and often living in poor rural areas, few Ainu have college or more advanced degrees. Also, due to rural poverty in Hokkaido, many of the young have left their communities for Sapporo or Tokyo in search of jobs. These displaced Ainu have lost their connection to the land as well as the knowledge of nature of their forbearers. It will take time and a major effort to revive knowledge and skills if the Ainu are to play a more important role in the interpretation and study of their own traditional lands.

A final problem is the distribution of Ainu in contemporary Hokkaido. Most of the officially recognized Ainu (about 30,000, although the Ainu Kyokai claims ten time more) are concentrated on the south coast of Hokkaido, along the Saru River and nearby coast (Iburi and Hidaka Districts). Nearly 66.7% live in this region today. Only 7.2 % of the officially recognized Ainu population of Hokkaido live near Shiretoko: 1.8 % to the north in Abashiri District, and 5.4 % to the south in Nemuro District. This no doubt reflects the historic influence of climate and geography: this is a region with long harsh winters, although the coastal waters abounded with fish and sea mammals. It could not support a larger population of permanent Ainu settlement as a balance with natural resources was necessary.

A Better Future?

It may be that 2008 will prove to be a pivotal year for the long Ainu struggle for human rights in the Japanese state. Controversy over the well-known Nibutani Dam case resulted in the courts recognizing them as an indigenous people in 1997, after years of denial. Japanese officials and Prime Ministers have long propagated the convenient myth of Japan as a harmonious homogenous state, thwarting the recognition, and therefore the rights, of the indigenous Ainu.14
In the summer of 2008 another legal breakthrough was achieved, which may prove to be a mere gesture; only time will tell. Anticipating the attention of the media to the 2008 Group of Eight (G8) Summit at the mountain resort of Toyako, Ainu activists and their foreign supporters organized an international “Indigenous Peoples Summit” days before global leaders arrived. The meeting included indigenous peoples from Canada, the United States, and other countries, and it was preceded by a walk from the northern tip of Hokkaido (Wakkanai) to Sapporo.15

No doubt fearing that adverse international publicity might destroy the harmony of the conference as occurred in Seattle, on June 6 the Japanese government issued a Cabinet Secretary announcement noting that since the G8 theme in 2008 was “Environment Summit,” it was appropriate to recognize that the Ainu were an indigenous people who lived in harmony with nature, possessing a unique language, religion, and culture. It called for a “panel of expert” be established to study policy to promote diverse Ainu interests.

Accordingly, in August 2008 the “panel of experts” convened to discuss how to maintain the “honour and dignity” of the Ainu. The panel includes one ethnic Ainu, Kato Tadashi, Executive Director of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. A report is promised by July 2009. The committee chair, Kyoto University Professor Emeritus Koji Sato, promised to find out what the Ainu really want, aided by site visits to Hokkaido. This may give an opportunity for Ono Yugo and others to make a case for Ainu participation in the management of Shiretoko, although there are other pressing needs of the Ainu community.

1 The author is indebted to the Northeast Regional Council of the Association for Asian Studies, which funded in large part the research and travel for this paper. Professor Yamasaki Koji of Hokkaido University’s Center for Ainu and indigenous Studies offered advice and suggestions for study of Japan’s “frontier ethnic group” the Ainu. A previous visit was made in July 1999.
3 Ibid, pp. 221-222.
4 Cite here Howell, Walker, Siddell and the other studies of traditional Ainu relations.
5 See Jacobson, Justin P., “Time and the Ainu: Japanese Nation-Building and the Conceptualization of Difference,” *Historical Geography* Vol. 36 (2008), pp. 161-181, for a discussion of why Japanese (wajin) historical constructs of the nation as a homogenous “family” make it difficult for Ainu today to make a case for ethnic and racial difference. Expanding the pre-Meiji boundaries of what was consider Japan to include Hokkaido (and the Ryukyus) required assimilationist policies that denied recognition of ethnic claims. Jacobson cleverly calls the Ainu an “asterisk” group that is threatened by the revival of right wing nationalist thought and politics in Japan.
6 See article on Indian removal from American park lands.

Such demands are not unique to Japan. In 2004 Gerard Baker became the first American Indian superintendent of Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills, part of sacred land set aside in the Sioux Reservation by treaty in 1868, but set aside in the gold rush of 1874. Indian activists see the four Presidents as tribute to the “manifest destiny” that took their lands. Rushmore now includes teepees where Indians can present their past, and an audio guide is available in Lakota: *The Economist*, August 2, 2008, p. 37.

In Ainu, Si is part of their word for the peninsula, Pet is river, and Ru means path or trail.

In fairness, the study is on nature rather than culture, although one of the key issues in both parks is how to preserve nature while permitting contact with contemporary culture (tourists) to view it without destroying its value. Canada and New Zealand offer comparative examples of nature preservation with indigenous people’s participation, although it is outside the scope of the present paper.


I am indebted to ann-elise lewallen (she prefers not to capitalize her name) who helped organize both the walk and the conference. She suggested people to meet and places to visit during my trip to Hokkaido. Professor lewallen’s dissertation is the first study of the role of Ainu women, and she has published on the problematic cultural and political issues surrounding wajin (and gaijin) studies of the Ainu: “Bones of Contention: Negotiating Anthropological Ethics within Fields of Ainu Refusal,” *Critical Asian Studies*, 39:4 (2007), pp. 509-540.