



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nuclear power plants and biocultural renaissance: A case study of Iwaishima Island in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan

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Abstract For three decades, Iwaishima Islanders have rejected the proposal for a nuclear power plant to be built 3.5 km from their home. Located in the Suo-nada Inland Sea, which has miraculously escaped contamination, dredging of sand, or reclamation that damaged the Seto Inland Sea after WWII, the islanders maintain their livelihood by marketing fresh fish and organic produce. Based on studies on the biodiversity and recent interviews, some underlying reasons for their unyielding struggle have come to light: (1) some worked in Fukushima Daiichi NPP, and knew its damaging effects on human health and the bioregion; (2) islanders exchange goods and services, with minimal dependence on cash; and (3) they have revived the 10-century-old *Kanmai* (divine dance) festival held every 4 years.

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Introduction

There is a projected site for a nuclear power plant on Nagashima Island in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan, the widest partially closed water system in East Asia (Figs. 1 and 2). Three decades have passed since this project was proposed in 1982. The natural environment of the Seto Inland Sea has deteriorated since the 1970s due to the effects of landfilling, dredging, and indus-

trial pollutants associated with the development of industrial complexes in Japan.

It was recently revealed, however, that despite the general degradation of the environment in this inland sea, the biodiversity of the Suo-nada Sea, the western-most part of the Seto Inland Sea, is still exceptionally well conserved. Furthermore, the sea around Nagashima Island has proved to be the best-conserved shallow water maritime biodiversity in Japan. Since 1999, biological and ecological discoveries have been made around Nagashima Island where Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant has been projected by CEPCO, Chugoku Electric Power Company (Kato, 2010: 11–22).

This paper points out that this biodiversity hotspot of Japan has been preserved thanks to the local community of Iwaishima Islanders (478 inhabitants as of September 2012), who live 3.5 km from the proposed site. They have not only used

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Fig. 1 The Seto Inland Sea of Japan is the widest partially closed water system in East Asia. Nuclear power plants in Japan and the proposed site at Kaminoseki in the Seto Island Sea (after Wikicommons).

the sea in a sustainable way, but also have fervently struggled to defend it from this big project supported by the national policy. It will point out that Iwaishima Islanders' stewardship of their environment is a key to a better understanding of their "biocultural diversity," and it will argue that it is the crucial role of academic societies to help the local communities to hand down their environment through generations and to encourage their "biocultural renaissance."¹

Historically, the name of Iwaishima Island appeared in *Man'yōshū*, the earliest existing anthology of Japanese poetry compiled sometime after 759 AD during the Nara period. It was regarded as an important landmark for the vessels passing the Seto Inland Sea. According to oral traditions, in August 886, a vessel returning to *Imi* village in today's Oita, Kyushu Island was shipwrecked on the shore of Iwaishima Island, and was rescued by the islanders. The vessel owners gifted them with barley seeds and *Kōjin*, a deity for agriculture. The divine dance festival *Kanmai* was started to memorize this encounter and celebrate the introduction of crops in Iwaishima, and they invite priest-dancers from *Imi* Shrine every 4 years (<http://www.iwaishima.jp/>).

In October 1982, CEPCO announced that Kaminoseki Town, which Iwaishima Island belongs to, is suited for a new nuclear power plant as its second site after the Shimane Nuclear Power Plant. In April 1983, Mr. Hideyuki Katayama was elected as a new mayor of Kaminoseki Town, and de-

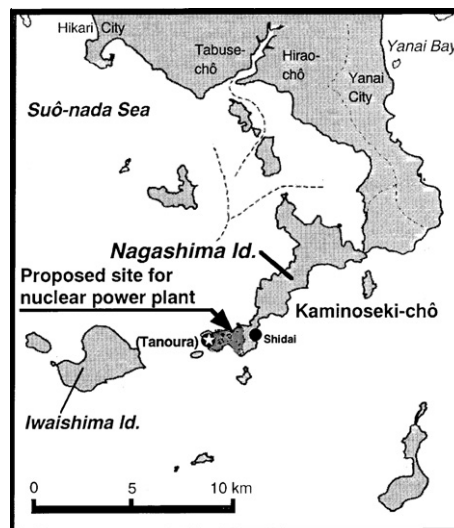


Fig. 2 Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant is projected on Nagashima Island, at 3.5 km from Iwaishima Island. Both islands belong to Yamaguchi Prefecture, and are located in the Suo-nada Sea, the western-most part of the Seto Inland Sea.

clared that he would welcome the project of CEPCO for constructing two 137.3-megawatt nuclear power reactors on the cove of Tanoura in Nagashima Island, just in front of the houses of Iwaishima Islanders. *Shidai* village, having the proposed site in its territory, agreed with the project with the exception of a few villagers; whereas 90% of Iwaishima Islanders were strongly against it. Since then, under economic and political influences of CEPCO, Mr. Katayama promoted the project for 20 years long as the mayor of Kaminoseki Town, and the succeeding mayors have continued his policy. Iwaishima Islanders have continued to demonstrate their non-compliance in spite of the gradual progress of the project favored both by local and national level policies and decisions. Iwaishima Islanders have carried out 1070 walking demonstrations on the island on Mondays, for example.

In 1987, 1 year after the accident at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, "No Nukes Yamaguchi Network" was formed as an association of citizens that were against the projected Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant, and members began to collaborate with Iwaishima Islanders and those who lived in Yamaguchi Prefecture. In March 2000, the Ecological Society of Japan made a resolution for the conservation of the proposed site through a more scientific environmental impact assessment, and a local NGO, the Association for the Conservation of Nagashima Island began its activities.

Although the Japanese government accepted the project in July 2001, and the permit for reclamation of the sea was given to CEPCO in 2008, the construction works have been at a standstill owing to the many obstacles facing it, including local landowners who have not agreed to sell their land and a fishing cooperative on nearby Iwaishima Island that has refused to accept compensation for the possible loss of their fishing rights (*Asahi Shinbun's Yamaguchi Branch*, 2001).

In 2010, two documentary films were made with Iwaishima Islanders: Hitomi Kamanaka's "Ashes to Honey: a search for energy independence in Sweden and Japan" (<http://888earth>).

¹ The term "biocultural diversity" in this article is defined as a set of plants and animals whose diversity has been maintained by local, indigenous cultural values and behaviors, which, in return, have been dependent on their local biodiversity (Ankei, 2002: 14). Hence, "biocultural renaissance" means the process of empowerment of communities for the conservation of their biocultural diversity and the passing of this heritage to future generations.

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