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Review: Drawing the Sea Near: Sautomi and Coral Reef Conservation in Okinawa

By C. Anne Claus

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Claus, C. Anne. *Drawing the Sea Near: Sautomi and Coral Reef Conservation in Okinawa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 249 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5179-06627, paperback, US\$27.00.

Drawing the Sea Near begins with language and imagery of Joni Mitchell's Big Yellow Taxi: what happens when paradise is paved over?

Claus details an introductory case study of the World Wide Fund for Nature's (WWF) involvement in Shiraho, Japan decades ago. A proposed airport threatened the region's blue coral reefs. Shiraho became a pivotal point in WWF's history, the case where it flexed its muscles and practiced strategies it became known for globally: the creation of national spaces meant to protect nature from development. While WWF's efforts were initially supported on the ground, its long-term strategy brought ire from Shiraho residents. In sharing this narrative, Claus centered on the realization that explained the discontent of Shiraho residents in WWF's transition from short to long-term: when it comes to long-term conservation efforts, long-term plans must meet the sensibilities of residents.

The case study captures the larger ideological problem—and subsequent shift—of environmental centered organizations. Their agendas have shifted from manufacturing distance between human activities and the natural 'other' that we are assumed to be apart from, to intentionally crafting nearness. In using a highly detailed case study to capture this shift, Claus fulfills an important need of environmental literature: turning the lens to conservation efforts. Conservationists are rarely the subject of ethnographic inquiry, even though environmental-conservation NGOs are some of the largest in the world.

Throughout the book, Claus uses incredible detail to discuss the shift to a participation-integration conservation style in Japan. The premise of participatory conservation is that

close encounters are the backbone of successful conservation efforts—not only in Okinawa, but potentially globally. Okinawa is an illustration, a case study effectively capturing broader transnational and NGO shifts in environmental activism.

Claus dedicates a considerable amount of space to explaining why Japan was chosen as a case study. The country is described as a ‘nation of contradictions’ even as it continues to experience severe Westernization pressures. Yet Claus maintains that researchers can still draw broader considerations from Japan, particularly as it is still subject to Western organizations which may impose Christian, Euro-American imaginations and values—most visible through their historical emphasis on protectionist schemes. This serves to not only divide humans from nature in a false dichotomy, but also creates a particular image of what stewardship looks like that is heavily culture-imbued.

Drawing the Sea Near serves two primary functions. The first is to challenge the notion of distance as positive in environmental protection. It does so successfully, providing empirical and theoretical evidence as to how interpersonal interactions with the environment and community and local levels help foster relationships with nature, subsequently protecting it. The second is to adapt and apply outsider theory to the East Asian case. While it does well articulate a Japan-specific notion of outsider theory (that specific classes of people are particularly endowed with ability to enact social change), for political science and public policy scholars, this application comes across as falling under a specific imagination that—while still certainly valid—shares fewer commonalities with the othering and outsider theories that share similar names. Overall, readers must remember that the idea of ‘lessons’ drawn from Okinawa does not necessarily mean specific practices as general frameworks or values (such as knowledge pluralism, or braided knowledge, to borrow from Indigenous studies).

Claus is an assistant professor of Anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C., a university known for international programs and applied lens. This reputation shines through in this book. They do not put forward any illusions of separateness from the subject of the manuscript: they discuss participating in the *sanizu* festival in Shiraho, Japan in the introduction. Indeed, throughout the book the forthcoming nature with which Claus shows they are part of the story is important.

Drawing the Sea Near incorporates an effective and discerning use of images (pictures, maps, and posters/written materials). More than one picture could have benefitted from the use of color printing (a limitation of most trade and academic books), but the overall use of images, particularly those taken by the author, enhances the reader’s understanding of the researcher-author as a player in the conservation narrative.

Overall, the book's clear prose offers an account of a case study that will certainly be engaging for many environmental scholars across disciplines, and particularly for East Asian area scholars. The use of a personal chronology and involvement is really what makes the book fitting for area-interested trade scholars as well. Without the personal narrative, it would risk being far less accessible to trade audiences, and purely meant for interested researchers and academics. We are fortunate Claus made the ethnography personal—storifying it ensures that broader audiences are not deprived of the clear writing and important takeaways of *Drawing the Sea Near*.

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