

PREFACE



Social and political life on small subtropical islands is frequently shaped by the economic imperative of sustainable tourism development. In Okinawa, “ecotourism” promises to provide employment for a dwindling population of rural youth while preserving the natural environment and bolstering regional pride. In this volume, I consider how new subjectivities are produced when host communities come to see themselves through the lens of the visiting tourist. I further explore how Okinawans’ sense of place and identity are transformed as their language, landscapes, and wildlife are reconstituted as cherishable yet vulnerable resources.

I present a case study of how local ecological knowledge moves inter-generationally (between Okinawan elders and youth) and cross-culturally (between Okinawan nature guides and international and mainland Japanese tourists, the latter being often also considered “foreign”). By tracing the formal and informal social networks through which specific attitudes, beliefs, and sensibilities about the environment are circulated and reproduced, I demonstrate how nature-based therapies marketed to tourists for stress relief and lifestyle rehabilitation (e.g., forest therapy, dolphin therapy, and coral gardening) also influence Okinawan attitudes toward health and wellness. These kinds of activities reconfigure human relationships with nonhuman animal species: creatures previously “good to eat” (Harris 1985) are now even better to heal.

Sustainability in Okinawa always begins with the question of military bases. The ecotourism concept poses a compelling, if problematic, economic alternative to the expansion of U.S. bases into northern Okinawa, the hub of environmentally oriented conservationist, educational, and tourist programs on the main island. My analysis of the ecological and cultural effects of sustaining the tourism industry in Okinawa speaks to small islands facing similar economic and environmental challenges in East Asia, the Caribbean, Oceania, and beyond.