

At the Stream's Edge

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The clear water flashes over the stones of the stream bed, hurrying on to its rendezvous with the sea. Tiny sharp fragments of hard subtropic sunlight flicker across its crystal ripples, their bright edges cutting into the deep shade of the overhanging forest. The only sounds are the soft whisper of the water and the wind-rustle of the leaves...

Okinawa has been inhabited by humankind since the Ice Age, but until fairly recently in its history, most of the island was a wilderness of valleys, hills and mountains clothed in this thick subtropical forest, *yanbaru* in the local language. The majority of inhabitants lived in the flatter, more easily cultivable areas of the island's southern end, believing the *yanbaru* was a dark and mysterious place, the abode of gods and spirits, not all of them inclined to benevolence.

It was home to the now-extinct Ryukyu deer and to the elusive Ryukyu wild boar. It was—and still is—home to strange birds and insects, of which new species are yet being discovered. But now the *yanbaru* shrinks as the great trees are cut down; the raw red earth is graded to become golf courses and resort condominiums. The clear streams disappear as the blood-tinted soil of the island washes into them and down them to the sea, where what was the foundation of a magnificent forest becomes a shroud of silt choking the life from equally magnificent coral reefs. In its dying, one habitat visits death upon another.

In the late 1980s, the Japanese government passed legislation designed to assist developers of resorts and other leisure facilities. What resulted was not so much any lessening of Japan's legendary workaholicism, but a tangled web of graft, greed, and environmen-

tal destruction. What was intended to benefit many ended up providing inflated profits for a few. And the environment of Japan has suffered as projects throughout the country have resulted in mountains and valleys being denuded for ski, golf, and marine resorts. Okinawa in particular has suffered degradation of its unique environment at an ever-accelerating rate. The Resort Law has become a chimera apparently unenvisioned by its authors.

The stream before me and the forest through which it runs, however, are not in immediate danger of resort development. They are part of a complex of military facilities used by the United States forces stationed in Okinawa. A number of wilderness tracts are included, and since they are used for training in jungle survival skills or are maintained as buffers around sensitive areas, they remain virtually untouched.

My shining stream and its surrounding forest are part of the munitions storage area at Kadena Air Base. If ever these wilderness areas are handed over to the Japanese government, I fervently—naively, to be sure—hope that they might be preserved as national parks. How paradoxical it is that a policy—the Resort Law—that if intelligently applied might add to the scale and value of the national park system has in fact resulted in large-scale environmental damage. And how equally paradoxical it is that some tracts set aside for military use have inadvertently preserved large areas of pristine Okinawa. In Japan, as elsewhere, intentions and results are all too often in diametric opposition.

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