

Volunteers and Visitor Centres In Japanese World Heritage Natural Sites Yakushima and Shirakami Sanchi

Based on a study tour by John Sinclair in September 2010

In 2004 John Sinclair undertook a study tour of a number of Japanese cultural World Heritage sites in Kyoto, Nara and Nikko. He also visited Kamakura which is proposed for World Heritage nomination.

Of Japan's World Heritage sites only three meet natural criteria. Shiretoko in Hokkaido, Yakushima and Shirakami Sanchi. This study focussed on the latter that are both very mountainous and both were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1993 (a year following Fraser Island). Both were the result of considerable community agitation led by volunteers. Both had to overcome formidable opposition from established timber industries.

The Japanese Government and the community now acknowledge and applaud the voluntary efforts of the advocates that led to the identification of the World Heritage values that ultimately led to their protection and their inscription on that illustrious list. They are about 2,000 kms apart. Both are only the core areas that contain the World Heritage values and both are surrounded by buffer s of protected areas. They are about 2,000 kilometres apart. Yakushima, 1000 kilometres south of Tokyo is focussed on the ancient cedars at the heart of the rugged and sub-tropical Yakushima Island. The oldest is estimated ay 7,200 years old. About 1,000 kilometres north of Tokyo is the Shirakami Sanchi World Heritage area protecting the last great stand of Japanese beech forests.

Both Yakushima and Shirakami Sanchi represent some of the last remnants of what were once much more widespread forests. Indeed Shirakami Sanchi's beech forests are representative of a forest that occurred throughout many parts of Japan and in other Northern Hemisphere forests.

In addition to the fight to stop the exploitation of these two forests by vested timber interests both local communities had to fight other threats to these precious unique forests. In Yakushima it was a proposal to turn most of the island into a military base. In the case of Shirakami Sanchi, it was a proposal to build a major road through the heart of the wilderness area.

Volunteers in Shirakami Sanchi

It is the wilderness values of Shirakami Sanchi that is most treasured by the community. It is a remote montane area difficult to access but now there is no entry allowed for the general public. The public has only access the \buffer areas surrounding the core World Heritage area. Therefore the efforts of the Shirakami Sanchi volunteers are largely confined to keeping the buffer areas tidy and assisting with track work there and helping to raise funds. We noted that the volunteers had raised millions of yen (about \$Au170,000) through donations. Much of this was then spent on maintaining access to Anmon Falls where part of the track had been recently washed away by floods. The writer thought that these efforts were directed more to providing recreational opportunities rather than protecting the site's natural values. It was reported that the access to the falls was used by about 100,000 people each year. In fact the sections of former track that had survived the flood were ugly while

the precarious scaffolding replacing the washed away sections was even uglier.



This was the uglified access to Anmon Falls that is subject to flooding. When large sections were washed out recently instead of closing access to the Falls the washed out track was replaced by even uglier scaffolding.



Precarious scaffolding replaced more than 100metres of washed away track to part of Anmon Falls.

From a stranger's viewpoint there needs to be some questioning of the application of funds. Should the be used to preserve and unsustainable access to a scenic attraction or should they be used to preserve the aesthetic values of this area.

There was another issue in Shiakami Sanchi where some of the volunteers who led the campaign for its international recognition now feel excluded from the World Heritage area they fought to establish. Visitation is now so restricted that nobody other than mangers and rangers is allowed entry to this wilderness without first obtaining a permit. These are not easy to obtain. They need to be applied for by mail at least seven days in advance or in person at one of the nine offices at least a day in advance. The most ardent advocates for protecting the area now feel excluded altogether.

This sense of exclusion is also being increasingly felt in many Australian World Heritage sites where managers who have been appointed since the inscription don't have the corporate memory to include in decision making those people who were most responsible for the World Heritage listing in the first place.

Volunteers in Yakushima

In the case of Yakushima the policy for volunteers is much more open and positive. Volunteers are actively encouraged and hold regular bees and continue to maintain their proprietorial feelings for the World Heritage site. A coordinator of volunteers is based in Tokyo and this allows Yakushima volunteers not only to work in the World Heritage site but also gain experience in other Japanese National Parks as well as allowing other volunteers to assist in the management of Yakushima.



This seat overlooking a Yakushima waterfall beside the main track was placed there by volunteers. They were former timber workers before the place became World Heritage which saw the end of their employment.

The projects undertaken by volunteers in Yakushima are mainly focussed on litter elimination and track work. While no litter was sighted in two days of walking along Yakushima tracks, the need for constant track-work and maintenance is very obvious. This is a result of the extremely high rainfall of about 8 metres of rain falling on the summits and highlands of Yakushima around which most of the World Heritage area is located. There is also incredibly heavy pedestrian use of the two major tracks in the order of more than 100,000 per annum. One route from Yakusugi Lands offers a circuit walk but the other walk, Shiratani Unsuikyo, that seemed even more popular results in most people walking in and out on the same route, doubling the impact on the track. The track originally installed by shingle harvesters is now heavily degraded. Another factor was that on the day

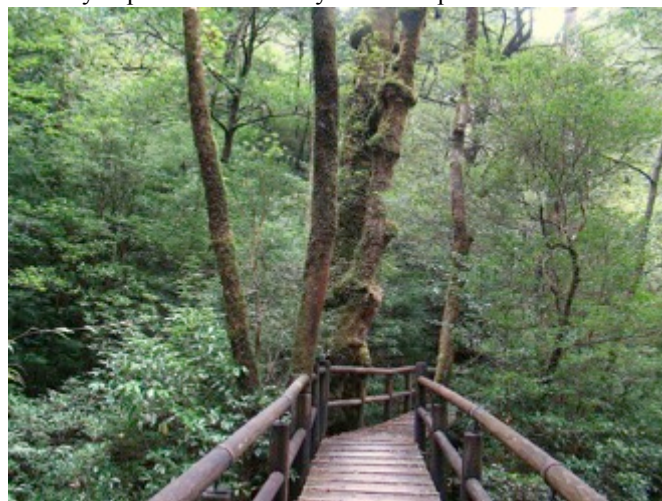
of that visit there were 300 people who had passed through the entry station before lunch.



The volume of pedestrian traffic and the very high rainfall scours out the Shiratani Unsuikyo walking track

This meant that there was very little time when one wasn't within the sound and/or sight of other visitors either coming or going. A one-way circuit would eliminate much of the sense of crowding.

The volume of traffic combined with the rainfall on the easily erodible granitic soil has resulted in much scouring leaving great lengths of track where the main surface is only tree roots and rocks. It seems that the main work of volunteers on these tracks is mainly bandaid work and it seems that there is an urgent need to provide more permanent and more sustainable tracks is left to the World Heritage managers, the Japanese World Heritage managers. However, the upgrading of the tracks is falling behind the need. Elevated walkways are very expensive but clearly the best option.



Like Fraser Island elevated walkways seem to be the best but very expensive solution to handling the volume of walkers in Yakushima's World Heritage area.

Weeds: There is again some problem over the lack of delegation by Forestry managers delegating the control of weeds to volunteers. This is based on an apprehension that volunteers might remove native plants. However there also seemed to be some uncertainty of the degree of threat that weeds might present for the World Heritage site. One person who did appreciate the threat was Tomoko Nagaka who works for the Yakushima Environment Culture Foundation who spent six weeks on Fraser Island including time spent as a volunteer for Conservation Volunteers Australia. She was

able to provide some insights on the role of Yakushima volunteers elaborating on information provided by others on the island.

Two particular projects encouraged by Yakushima volunteers are public education programs: One involved not feeding monkeys and the other the safe disposal of human waste.

Monkeys: The problems evolving from the feeding of monkeys are not dissimilar to the problems arising from humans habituating dingoes on Fraser Island although the outcome for the monkeys is slightly less drastic. In the case of Yakushima habituated monkeys become a threat to humans and they are thereafter permanently locked up

Human Waste: Encouraging people to carry out their human waste involves not only education but some elaborate infrastructure. Volunteers have already constructed a toilet building in Yakusugiland to provide privacy so that people can enter. The small building contains a throne under which portable receptacles can be placed. and place their waste in bags that the need to have had the foresight to have purchased the appropriate bags in advance and carried them into the park. They then have to carry the waste out.



The receptacles to fit under the throne of this weather-proof field toilet are sold at the entrance stations to the park walk and there is a deposition facility near the exit.

Deer populations: One element worthy of note in Yakushima is the over-population of deer. This is seen as a long-term problem in regenerating the forest. It is demonstrated very well for the public by establishing very visible exclosures. The demonstration looks very convincing. FIDO's exclosure of brumbies at Eli Creek demonstrated how well pandanus regenerated when feral horses couldn't browse them. This helped change public attitudes to the removal of brumbies on Fraser Island. It appears that Yakushima management has to yet win

sufficient support for controlling deer populations. If volunteers can change visitor values and get them to remove their human waste, then volunteers could assist in advancing the case for controlling the deer population.



Deer over-population is impacting on the natural regeneration of the forest.

Visitor Centres

Because consideration is being given to what would be the most appropriate visitor centre for Fraser Island there was a particular interest and focus on the Visitor Centres provided for these two World Heritage areas.

There was a variety of ways used to present both Yakushima and Shirakami Sanchi to visitors.

World Heritage Centres: Both WHAs had World Heritage Centres managed by the management agencies but these while offering interpretation they received relatively little public visitation. They operated to public service hours and they mainly seemed to serve mainly as administrative centres primarily as a base for the bureaucrats and other park staff.

The World Heritage Centre for Shirakami Sanchi near Hirosaki was closed for the entire holiday long weekend of the visit. This didn't allow it to be evaluated. The Yakushima World Heritage Centre though did provide interpretive displays. Like the Hirosaki World Heritage Centre it was almost immediately adjacent to adjacent to Visitor Information Centres that had been provided by the prefectural governments at great public expense and which housed outstanding displays.

Prefectural World Heritage Visitor Information Centres: Both areas had Visitor Information Centres all with the most impressive displays. All of The Visitor Centres (as opposed to the World Heritage Centres) were open seven days a week and attracted many more visitors although in some cases they were side by side with the World Heritage Centres. and had very helpful staff.

Yakushima had two Visitor Information Centres. One was located near the ferry terminal in the island's main town and the other beside the World Heritage administrative centre. Both had impressive displays on different themes. The one in Miyaura was a more general interpretation of the island folk culture while the Yakusugi Museum Unlike the Shiakami Sanchi Visitor Centre at Hirosaki both required entry fees to explore the displays. However there was free public access to the tourist information services and

amenities. The Centre close the ferry terminal had café included in the complex.

The Yakusugi Museum was as impressive on the outside as its magnificent display was on the inside. The architecture probably won awards.

It wasn't in the best of locations and this may explain It was six kilometres out of the nearest town settlement (Anbo) and it wasn't visible from the main passing road. It is also at least still a 40 minute drive from the actual World Heritage area. It deserved greater patronage than was evident. It seemed to have less support for the Visitor Centre near the ferry terminal, probably because of both its isolation and because it didn't combine the other information services for tourists, merchandising and café associated with it. Yakusugi was a specific purpose built museum. Although only a fraction of the visitors to the World Heritage area would have visited this museum it still attracted many visitors who got good value for the 300yen (\$AU5.00) fee. It was surprising though that



The impressive architecture of the Yakusugi Museum was not limited to the exterior.

The Museum presentations included photos, movies, hands on exhibits showing the island's natural wonders and a comprehensive history of the timber industry mainly based around manufacturing shingles from the cedars (yaku). There was also an impressive presentation of the natural history and World Heritage values of the island, There were many ancient cedar relics presented in almost reverential style. While this is most impressively presented the interpretation was in Japanese. However a most useful set of explanations in English is provided on entry.

What was unusual was the inclusion of a New Zealand display in this museum. The Kiwis drew parallels with the former New Zealand kauri forests (whilst omitting to mention that they have been virtually obliterated. However it did seem that if New Zealand could get a display there should be scope for Fraser Island which has many parallels with Yakushima (both island World Heritage areas where there have been former timber industries) to provide a display there at some future time.

The second **Yakushima Visitor Centre** is at the main entry point to the island and in the largest town, Miyanouira. While the interpretation focussed less on World Heritage and was more oriented to people and history of the island as a whole it seemed more bustling probably because of the wider range of services it offered.



Part of the impressive displays of the Yakusugi Museum that was featured a theme of the importance and former uses of the yaku (cedar trees) of the island.

Shirakami Sanchi straddles two prefectures and although few people are able to physically visit this remote and rugged area and because access is restricted, the area is presented to a much greater audience through Visitor Centres in both prefectures. It wasn't feasible to stop in Akita just to see this prefecture's Visitor Centres. However the Aomori prefecture's Visitor Centre near Hirosaki was daunting in the size and the quality of its presentations. There was no admission fee to the display the featured the most comprehensive presentation of almost every aspect of life associated with the beech trees – birds, mammals, invertebrates and reptiles. There was also prominence given to the history of the World Heritage recognition and the part played by volunteers. An additional feature of this Visitor Centre was the inclusion of an Imax theatre showing a 40 minute feature on Shirakami Sanchi. Thus while it wasn't possible to visit the World Heritage site itself, one could get an appreciation of it ecology and great wilderness value. While admission to the displays was free there was a 300 yen (\$AU5) entry fee for the theatre. It also provided some wider tourist information.

Observations indicate that siting of Visitor Centres is critical to the patronage they receive. Location in an urban setting seems to be a significant advantage and especially combining other services besides just World Heritage interpretation. Fees didn't seem to make a lot of difference.

Prefecture Parks: Apart from the World Heritage Visitor Centres there was an opportunity to inspect another Visitor Centre in a Prefectural Park near the city of Yaita. What was surprising was the scale of this Visitor Centre provided by the Prefecture and the quality of its interpretation. This even occurred in a significant natural area but without National Park status. Few national parks in Australia have such quality presentations.

It was also interesting to observe the work being done in some prefecture parks to preserve the tracks. The introduction of a new surfacing material on the more heavily used walking tracks was most interesting. It provided a softer feel but seemed at least as durable as concrete.

It is hoped to explore Shiretoko World Heritage site on a future visit to gain more insights into Japanese methods for managing World Heritage natural sites.