

Settlement into Hokkaido and its Effect on the Environment and the Ainu People

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I. Introduction

Until around 400 years ago, the Ainu controlled Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's four main islands. Today the Ainu are a small minority group in Japan and are primarily a hunting and fishing people whose origins remain in dispute. Yet, for centuries, the Ainu culture developed alongside Japanese culture, but is distinctive from that of the Japanese. However, in recent centuries, particularly since the 1889 *Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Law*, they have been subject to Japanese government policies of modernization and integration. As with indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States, the Ainu have had the majority of their sacred lands taken from them by the Japanese government. Prior to 1867, the Ainu people lived in the areas known now as northern Honshu, Hokkaido, the southern part of Karafuto (Sakhalin), and the Kurile Islands. It was during the Meiji period primarily that the Japanese government officially annexed most of the Ainu homeland renaming it Hokkaido (Weiner, 1997). Prior to the Meiji period, the Ainu were thought of and treated as a 'barbaric' minority group in Japan.

Towards the end of the 19th century in the period known as the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Japanese government initiated a stricter and more formal assimilation policy towards the Ainu. This change in policy had a significant impact on Ainu culture. Prior to these Meiji reforms, the Ainu perceived themselves as one with the environment, and as stewards of the land in Hokkaido, thus, any relationships that they had with their land was connected because they had a genuine relationship with the surrounding ecology. Robinson (1976) discusses everything that the Ainu stood for with regards to positive human-land interactions, and states that the Ainu were very conscious about the contact between themselves and the organisms existing within their environment. Because of systematic exclusion and marginalization by the Japanese government at

large which the Ainu have faced, they have all but lost their culture and identity, including their connection with the land. Also, due to environmental change caused by the settlement of Japanese people on the island of Hokkaido, the Ainu of the past 100 years have had little success in maintaining and strengthening their culture and traditions.

This paper will examine four points. First, the background and history of Japanese settlement in Hokkaido will be outlined with a focus on the interaction between the Japanese and Ainu. Second, the Japanese utilization of and its negative impact on the ecological resources in Hokkaido will be explained. Third, the changes which occurred within the Ainu community from the 1920's to the 1970's will be examined, and finally these areas will be drawn together and discussed.

II. History of Japanese Movement into Hokkaido

Hokkaido is one of Japan's four main islands, and is the northernmost one. It is 83,520 square kilometers, and comprises one-fifth of Japan. Hokkaido is where most of the current day Ainu live, yet, a small number of Ainu live on southern Sakhalin. Historically the Ainu also lived in the southern Kuril Islands, along the lower reaches of the Amur River, and in Kamchatka, as well as the northern part of the Northeast region of Honshu. Their ancestors may have once lived throughout Japan as well, reaching southwards to the lower parts of Honshu (Shigeru, 1994). Hokkaido is surrounded by beautiful coasts; the island has many mountains, lakes, and rivers. Until the twentieth century Hokkaido was densely wooded with ancient trees. Two major mountain ranges, the Kitami in the north and Hidaka in the south, divide Hokkaido into eastern and western regions. The Saru Basin area in southeastern Hokkaido is a center of Ainu ancestral culture (Shigeru, 1994).

Before the Meiji period, the Ainu people underwent extensive changes within their lands. In the 1400's the Japanese or *Wajin* as they were known to the Ainu, regarded the Ainu as mere savages, barbarians, or even demons. However, the Ainu who lived in Ezogashima, or present day Hokkaido, controlled various natural resources, which the Japanese would eventually want to control themselves. As a flourishing trade developed in furs and sea products by the fifteenth century, Japanese trading posts "littered the southern tip of Hokkaido" (Suzuki & Oiwa, 1996, p.126). Ezogashima's name would change to Ezo; then to Ezochi; until eventually when the Meiji Restoration of 1868 occurred, Ezochi was finally renamed Hokkaido. Hokkaido was transformed into a colony of the new Japanese state, a so-called 'empty land' that over time would be "settled by immigration and developed along capitalist lines" (Weiner, 1997, p.22).

Appropriation of Ainu lands was realized within the Meiji period when the *Land Regulation Ordinance* of 1872 was enacted. This would lead to the depletion of forests, salmon and deer stocks, sometimes completely in certain regions. Also extensive river building projects began to emerge in Hokkaido, such as the clearing of river shores to build homes on and the damming of segments of river valleys to route water to new Japanese communities throughout Hokkaido. Projects like the Nibutani Dam in the late 20th century would begin to change much of the ancient landscapes of Hokkaido. The relocating of Ainu into communities, or reservations as they are called in North America, would enable the Japanese government to “further remove the Ainu from their most fertile agricultural lands especially in the early 20th century” (Shigeru 1994, p.87). This also happened in Sakhalin and the Kuriles as well. Weiner (1997, p. 23) points out that by the end of the nineteenth century, “the 17,000 Ainu accounted for around 2 percent of the population of Hokkaido”. In its drive to 'settle' the island of Hokkaido, the government of Japan invited specialists on assimilation policies targeting Native Americans from the United States. In 1899, the Japanese government enacted its *Former Aboriginals Protection Act* (Howell, 2005). This law, which was effective until 1997, was in fact used as a model for the colonization of other Asian countries such as Taiwan and Korea as well.

As the Ainu lost more land and were eventually conquered by the Japanese, they reached a point to where their races' future was looking very gloomy. Things would change slightly when in 1899 the *Protection Act* was enacted. According to Howell, under the *Protection Act* the Ainu were granted small plots of land in an attempt to turn them into farmers (p.178). The Ainu were soon seen as an internally colonized native population (Weiner, 1997), as seen with many other aboriginal and native populations around the world in the early twentieth century, most Ainu were in a terrible state, as most of them “were sunk in chronic destitution” and were just barely able to survive (Weiner, p.24). When a country abandons its native populations, this is the inevitable conclusion. The Ainu continued living in states of poverty and isolation in the late 1800's and early 1900's, practically ignored by the Japanese living in Hokkaido. Money and resources, a lack of education, and anger within most of the Ainu communities tore families apart and drove the Ainu people to further their own internal cultural breakdown (Suzuki & Oiwa, p.124). This loss of money and resources provides a very important case study, as many geographers worldwide have come to use the story of Ainu displacement in Hokkaido as a topic of study. Thus, “geographers have an opportunity to take a significant role in complex environmental science and other approaches to human-environment studies” because geography “has

biophysical (human-land interactions in Hokkaido), socioeconomic (declining sika deer populations), and technological sides, and it stresses synthesis” between the Japanese using land properly and environmental consciousness in Hokkaido (Yarnal, 2004, p. 32).

III. Japanese Land Processes which Negatively Impacted Hokkaido’s Ecological Resources

1. Case Example: Sika Deer

Prior to Japanese colonization of Hokkaido in the late 19th century, sika deer, wolves, and brown bears coexisted with the Ainu people (Kaji, 2000, p. 699). The sika deer populations prior to major Japanese movement into Hokkaido in 1869 were large in number. However, records show that from 1873 to 1878 the sika deer populations decreased greatly mainly due to the harvesting of hides and antlers. Also, habitat loss became rampant in the years following 1869 due to “agricultural development and commercial utilization of forest products” (Kaji, p. 700). Eventually when lowland forests began disappearing along with sika deer populations by 1926, there were bans put onto hunting of the sika deer, yet much of the damage had been done, and remained so until the 1950’s and onwards, when their numbers would rise to normal historical levels (Figure 1).

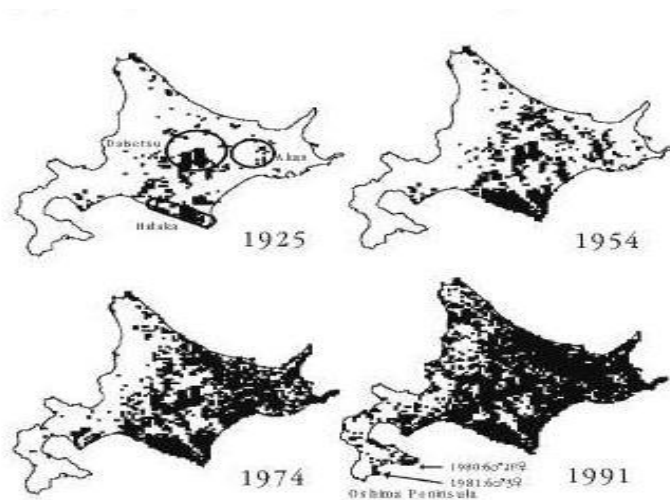


Figure 1. Sika deer range expansion from 1925 to 1991 on Hokkaido, Japan, estimated from observations reported in personal interviews and mail surveys. Arrows at the southern end of Oshima Peninsula indicate sites where deer were released in 1980 and 1981. Deer populations expanded from the Hidaka, Daisetsu, and Akan mountain regions.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Kaji, 2000, www.jstor.org/view/00917648/ap070110/07a00330/1?frame=noframe&userID=ce7bb19c@tru.ca/01c0a848660050fdb95&dpi=3&config=jstor

2. Case Example: Nibutani Dam and Nagara River Estuary Dam, Hokkaido

The Nibutani dam located on the Saru river in Hokkaido has been controversial since it was completed in 1997. In maps 2 and 3 one can see how the Saru river looks like a lake just north of the Nibutani dam, however, following the dam northward it thins out again, which is how the Saru river would have looked before the damming project. This is mainly due in part to the Saru river being an important sacred land for the Ainu, as was argued in the Nibutani Dam court case of 1997 between *Kayano and Others vs. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee*. In the Nibutani area, traditional Ainu spiritual and technological culture is preserved. In addition, it is not just that many who hand down the folklore of Ainu to future generations have been from the area, but many scholars from Japan and abroad have visited there, and it is known as the birthplace of Ainu cultural research. Moreover, as has been discussed in class Japan is located in the monsoon climate zone.

In the case of the Nagara River Estuary Dam, built on a brackish zone, which is the most important zone for many creatures. The dam on the Nagara River has caused much fish loss. There is the deterioration of water quality for one, also increased sedimentation in dammed lakes causes flooding i.e. the Ohi river dam. Also, dams tend to destroy or negatively intrude onto spawning grounds i.e. the Yoshii and Nagara rivers. In an article by Tadahiko Sakamoto, he argues that dams are needed in Japan to provide consistent water to the population. He also adds that the long term benefits of damming bodies of water offer recreation areas for humans (2004, p. 3). This is disagreeable because it is hard to see how the damming of important spawning rivers for example, should take a back seat to recreation, also, the pollution from water craft in a dammed area defeats the purpose of it being used for clean drinking water in the first place.



Map 1. Close view of the main Nabutani dam at the south end of the dammed section of the Saru River. At the north end is a smaller dam. Satellite image courtesy of Google Earth.



Map 2. Far off satellite image of how the dammed section of the Saru River resembles a large lake when compared to the thin Saru River south and north of the two dams. Satellite image courtesy of Google Earth.

IV. Future Change

In the 1920s and 1930s, younger Ainu such as Iboshi Hokuto, Chiri Yukie and Ega Torazo became forerunners of a movement to improve the state of their people (Weiner, 1997). Consequently, it was through the initiative of a new generation of Ainu with the help of Japanese allies, Christians, and expatriates within Japan that the Ainu would slowly begin to rebuild their communities and resist their poor treatment in Japanese society. Up until 1930, there would be movements to revise the *Protection Act* and to change the mindset that the Ainu were just a 'dying race' and nothing more. In 1930, the first organization was formed to unite "like-minded young Ainu from previously isolated communities to come together" (Weiner, 1997, p.25). This organization was known as the *Ainu Kyokai*. Ultimately, this organization sparked a battle within Ainu society, to make sure that their people would retain their heritage and began to create a delicate "sense of Ainu unity" (Fitzhugh & Dubreuil, 1999, p.281).

In 1946, the Ainu people established the *Ainu Association of Hokkaido*. With financial support from the government, the *Ainu Association* was able to offer assistance to improve the living standards and education of the Ainu. However, this support was limited to those Ainu who lived in Hokkaido; the Ainu living outside of Hokkaido were not eligible for support. Many Ainu migrated to large cities outside of Hokkaido to look for jobs with the hope that discrimination would be milder in the city, or that they could blend in altogether. As a result, many of the Ainu became ineligible for support. It was a harsh choice, but today many Ainu choose to lose their identity so that they can blend into Japanese society.

Eventually the efforts of Hokuto, Yukie, and Torazo and others like them began to collapse after 1945. The Japanese majority, due to their superior position, continued to shape who the Ainu thought they were. After World War II, the *Ainu Kyokai* was resurrected, but the momentum it carried before the war was never to be seen again. Torn by divisions and a lack of resources, the Ainu were unable to challenge the domination within the social mindscape of the Japanese at large. In the 1970's civil and humans rights were used to support the Ainu struggle, however it was not until recently when the *Ainu Moshiri* (Ainu Nation) legitimized the existence of the Ainu people and underscored their claims for increased access to wealth, land and power within their historical lands.

V. Conclusion

As discussed, due to the marginalization and assimilation policies enacted against the Ainu by the Japanese governments both past and present, their future

is quite uncertain. The same is true for the island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido is a very important place to the Ainu people, and often the population at large seems to forget just how much they benefit from the regions resources. Concerning regulations and ordinances put onto the Ainu by the Japanese governments, they have had to deal with much strife as a cause of this. However, it is apparent that Hokkaido's ecological resources be maintained and that the Ainu be respected as stewards of these resources. Within the two examples, one describing the decline of sika deer populations and the other, which focuses on the building of the Nagara River Estuary Dam and Nibutani dam, one can comprehend the effects that major Japanese movement had upon the island of Hokkaido. However, thanks in part to modern day interested in protecting Hokkaido's resources, much of the regions wealth has been spared and in the future, development like dam building and deforestation in the area will decline. Ainu situations can improve further with increased awareness and education put into the primary and secondary school grades throughout Japan.

VI. References

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