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# Signifying Ainu Space: Reimagining Shiretoko's Landscapes through Indigenous Ecotourism<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Recognized as Japan's indigenous peoples in 2008, the Ainu people of Hokkaido have sought to recuperate land and self-determination by physically reenacting Ainu traditional knowledge through ecotourism in Hokkaido. Colonization and assimilation have severed most contemporary Ainu from relations with nonhuman sentient beings (*A. kamuy*) rooted in land and waterways. Ecotourism provides a context for reenacting an ancestral ontology through engaging in wild food gathering, relearning subsistence practices for cultural transmission, and reinscribing Ainu cultural logics onto the land through stewardship and language. At the same time, the Japanese government's campaign to have Shiretoko nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage site can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimate Japanese claims to Shiretoko and reinscribe the authority of Japan, as both the proper steward to ensure responsible conservation of Shiretoko but also the rightful owner and proper occupant of the promontory and its surrounding waterways. The article reveals how Ainu attempts to establish relationships and assert ancestral claims with the *kamuy* in the landscape are stymied by the ongoing reality of settler colonialism and erasure of Ainu presence in the landscape. Further, it explores how a capitalist-driven economy of ecotourism unleashes new dynamics in relations between local Ainu fishers and farmers in Shiretoko and outsider Ainu who seek to develop ecotourist initiatives.

**Keywords:** indigenous activism; Ainu; Japan; world heritage; ecotourism; settler colonialism; traditional ecological knowledge; indigenous space; ecological colonialism

## 1. Introduction

Settler colonialism strives for the dissolution of native societies. It erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base<sup>1</sup> To get in the way, all the Native has to do is stay at home ([2], p. 38).

In 2005, Shiretoko National Park in the eastern borderlands of Japan's northern island, Hokkaido, was selected as the nation's third World Natural Heritage site. Yet, until 1869, Hokkaido (Ezo until 1869) had not been officially incorporated into Japan, although ethnic Wajin (ethnic Japanese) settlements on the southern tip of the island date to the fifteenth century. For its indigenous Ainu community, the Shiretoko region was better known as *Sir-etok*, and the entire island was seen as the domain of

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Ainu ancestors [3]. On the one hand Shiretoko's selection as a World Heritage site appears to herald a new epoch with its conservation-based framework and to ensure economic opportunities for the local community. Yet, on the other hand, this article will elucidate how UNESCO's designation serves to reinscribe settler colonial "logics of elimination"—or the erasure of long-standing Ainu histories and memories of place in this land—after nearly genocidal policies eliminated Ainu bodies and lives in the Shiretoko Peninsula. To situate this transformation between Ainu ontological positions in being with the landscape and the settler colonial embrace of conservationism, below I introduce three historical moments that encapsulate that shift.

### 1.1. 18th Century Claims in Eastern Hokkaido

In July 1798, after three months of difficult travel from Edo (present-day Tokyo), Tokugawa-appointed surveyor Kondō Jūzō and his attendant Kimura Kenji arrived on the shores of Etorof Island on the eastern periphery of present-day Hokkaido. Kimura drew out his brush, and with a swift flick of his wrist, wrote out the characters for *Dainihon Etorof* ("Imperial Japan Etorofu") on a wooden placard, which Kondo then inserted in the soil of the newly claimed territory, thus, embedding Japan's authority in the land [4]. By the late 17th century, Matsumae authorities in southwest Ezo had set up trading posts around Hokkaido's perimeter. Merchants then leased these trading posts from the Matsumae domain, and during the next hundred years, they were transformed into contract fisheries. Contractors in the fisheries gradually coerced Ainu into serving as corvée labor and trafficked them to the fisheries in distant locales, thus curtailing the ritualized trade exchanges between Ainu and Matsumae authorities. With pressure from the Matsumae to increase production to help pay down the debt to the shoguns in Edo, conditions in the fisheries gradually worsened. In Eastern Hokkaido, anger and desperation from the abusive conditions in these fisheries prompted Ainu to launch the Kunasir-Menasi War to reclaim control of the fisheries (1789), a violent conflict that was brutally quelled by beheading 36 young Ainu.

I have lingered on this moment wherein Wajin sought to reinforce their settler presence in Ezochi through repression of indigenous labor and armed resistance to illustrate how settler colonialism achieves legitimacy through two processes: first, it "destroys to replace" and next, "it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base" ([2], p. 388). It is in this act of inscribing the characters for "Imperial Japan Etorofu"<sup>2</sup> and embedding it in the earth that the Tokugawa regime sought to inscribe a new relationship to this land, initially an imperial claim and later instituted a settler colonial project. The imperial relationship that Tokugawa authorities sought to establish in 1798 is distinct in character and political administration from the totalizing colonial control exerted under Meiji era nation-building (1869–onward), nevertheless, these late-Tokugawa land-claims in eastern Hokkaido negate the autonomy and the physical presence of long-established Ainu communities in Etorof. Because the Tokugawa regime asserted direct control over eastern Hokkaido and introduced stringent assimilation policies among Ainu in the region just one year later, clearly the Tokugawa authorities sought to impose sovereign control over the land and resources here. Anxiety about Russian encroachment in the southern Kurils spurred Tokugawa officials to wrest control from the Matsumae domain.

Until the 18th century Ainu settlements thrived along the coasts of Hokkaido, but with the introduction of the contract fisheries in the mid-eighteenth century, the forced relocation and corvée labor radically reorganized Ainu relationships with nonhuman *kamuy* and their ancestors. Among other factors, Tokugawa forces' brutal clampdown on Ainu resistance to the fisheries' system in this war

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<sup>2</sup> In Japanese, the plaque was inscribed, 大日本登府. In this case, the use of the character "Dai" for "great" or "imperial" conveys imperial control over the land and corresponds to similar uses of "Dai" among Imperial rulers in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644 to 1912) dynasties of China. Tokugawa officials in particular used the character "Dai" (大) to distinguish Japan's rule as having dominion under heaven and independent from the rule of the Chinese emperors (Personal Communication: Luke Roberts, 9 November 2015).

precipitated a massive depopulation of Eastern Hokkaido. A population of 2000 Ainu in 1789 had shrunk to 1312 Ainu in 1822, and by 1859 it had collapsed to 713 persons<sup>3</sup>.

For example, Shari and Abashiri fisheries in Eastern Ezo at the gateway to the Shiretoko region, were two of the most productive fisheries across Ezo until the outbreak of the Kunasir-Menasi<sup>4</sup> War in 1789 [6]. During this conflict, Wajin observers reported that Ainu on Kunasir Island were annihilated by their *wajin* overlords. Ainu in neighboring regions such as Shari and Abashiri were recruited as replacement labor and compelled to move to Kunasir. The fisheries system also enabled Wajin fishery managers to institute gender-segregated labor, splitting Ainu families apart by sending husbands and wives to distant fisheries across Ezo. Ethnic Wajin fisheries managers instituted a system of sexual colonization, forcing Ainu women to serve as mistresses or “local wives” (*J. genchi zuma*) for mainland Japanese bosses, or subjecting them to sexual assault at the hands of *wajin* laborers [7,8]. This system also fostered the spread of communicable diseases alongside venereal diseases, thus causing infertility<sup>5</sup>. Women (and men) of childbearing age were therefore separated from their spouses, and those who did not perish as a result of sexual and physical abuse or attempt suicide to escape found themselves infertile<sup>6</sup>. Today the official Ainu population of Utoro, the municipal base of the Shiretoko World Heritage site, is only four persons.

The third moment in Ainu-*kamuy-wajin* relations demonstrates more recent resistance to commodification of Shiretoko’s forests. In 1986, the central Forestry Agency proposed to selectively log a virgin forest within the national park borders, a proposal originally tabled in 1956. The logging project engendered an intense controversy involving several environmental protection groups, Ainu, and the national government, lasting nearly two years. While the Forestry Agency described its target as harvesting one out of every 100 trees from an “overmature stand”, environmentalists determined that trees were being earmarked for logging based primarily on market value and that the agency was targeting young, thick-trunked trees.

Meanwhile, eastern Ainu assertions of a strong link with the *kamuy* in Shiretoko reveal much about Ainu relationships with Shiretoko in the 1980s. On 8 September 1986, a broad coalition of eastern Hokkaido Ainu, calling themselves the Ainu Spirit Campaign to Block Logging in Shiretoko<sup>7</sup>, demanded that the *kamuy* dwelling in the forests and the forests be protected at all costs. They proposed three actions: (1) a public *kamuynomi* prayer ritual at the proposed timber site; (2) a dramatic public reading of the Blakiston’s fish owl *yūkar* (oral literature); and (3) as a last resort to protect local *kamuy*, the *kewtanke*, a ritual reserved only for states of emergency. Campaign leader Toko Nupuri defined the *kewtanke* as “a cry for rescue to the *kamuy* and a prayer to avoid disaster. We men who deliver the *kewtanke* will bellow with all of our physical and spiritual being until not one drop of moisture remains in our bodies. By risking our lives, we will implore those planning the logging to cease” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 8 September 1986). The *kewtanke* ceremony in Eastern Hokkaido harks back to Ainu grief rituals after the Matsumae officials’ execution of 36 Ainu, as punishment for instigating the 1789 Kunasir-Menasi War.

The Shari mayor as representative of the local community initially took a hardline approach in his negotiations with the Forestry Agency, urging a total freeze on the proposed timbering. Newspaper reports on 20 September 1986, however, hint at possible bribery, with the mayor demanding postponement of the logging and then suddenly three hours later suggesting a settlement. In sum, the mayor proposed a selective harvest after the Forestry Agency conducted an environmental impact

<sup>3</sup> ([5], p. 231).

<sup>4</sup> Menasi is an Ainu term for “east” and in this case refers to eastern Hokkaido. The Kunasir-Menasi War pit Ainu in the contract fisheries against their *wajin* managers and overlords.

<sup>5</sup> Okuyama (1966), for example, has argued that syphilis was a central factor in the sharp Ainu population decline in the 19th century, and Crosby (1986), writing on ecological imperialism likewise argues that venereal diseases destroy colonized peoples’ ability to reproduce, leading to a population crash.

<sup>6</sup> ([9], p. 186).

<sup>7</sup> In Japanese, *Ainu Seishin ni yoru Shiretoko Rikki Basai Sōshi Undō no Kai*.

study to project how the logging might affect the animal inhabitants. In March 1987, after determining that the endangered Blakiston's Fish Owl (J: *shimafukurō*) population would not be significantly impacted, the Forestry Agency approved the revised logging proposal. This moment in the history of settler engagement in the Shiretoko landscape demonstrates how *wajin* in Hokkaido had already adopted a conservationist approach to the ecology of the region, in contrast to the government's attempts to capitalize on its abundant natural resources. Further, inasmuch as Ainu attempts to block the timbering were discussed in only one of 37 news accounts, this episode suggests that Ainu were already erased from Shiretoko landscapes sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, as the depopulation figures indicate.

### 1.2. Settler Colonial Landscapes in Shiretoko

Since arriving in Shiretoko in the mid-eighteenth century, *wajin* merchants and later settlers have sought to capitalize on the resources of Eastern Hokkaido, including marine products, timber, sulfur deposits, Ainu labor, and since the mid-20th century, tourism. Farmers migrating from Honshu introduced agriculture from the late 19th century onward. In the wake of significant logging and continuing marine harvesting from fisheries that comprise the backbone of the region's economy, *wajin* naturalists and wildlife biologists began to assert conservationist principles in the mid-1980s. Even though the peninsula was officially incorporated into the fold of the national park system in 1964, selective logging continued unabated through the early 1990s. Meanwhile, fisheries unions proved formidable adversaries to the Natural Heritage campaign that culminated in 2005. They worried that the new World Natural Heritage recognition would impose drastically-reduced quotas in the Alaska Pollock (J: *suketō tara*) catch, the most productive element of the Shiretoko fisheries [3]. In sum, within little more than a century, the ecological footprint of *wajin* settlers drastically altered the ecological balance and composition of landscape in Shiretoko and Hokkaido more broadly.

From an Ainu perspective, the effort to consolidate *wajin* conservation and preservation of the landscape for the benefit not only of fellow Japanese but also for humanity worldwide through the World Natural Heritage system appeared to contradict systemic *wajin* exploitation of Shiretoko until that point. Moreover, the government's repeated assertions that Ainu simply *did not exist* as a separate people distinct from Japanese reinforced *wajin* settler colonial erasures of the Ainu relationships with, and care for, the landscape. Native studies scholar Traci Voyles distinguishes settler colonialism from other forms of colonialism by arguing that in addition to resource extraction to provide energy or raw materials for the metropole, the settler state seeks to displace indigenous communities by sending in settlers to "remake Native land as settler home" ([10], p. 7). The settler state achieves this by disregarding indigenous relationships to the land and reimagining the land as already belonging to the settler newcomers, or as land that should be repurposed and rendered productive. Settler narratives in Hokkaido incorporate both approaches via the notion that Hokkaido was destined as a Japanese land based on Abeno Hirafu's seventh-century claims, and Hokkaido as an uncultivated wilderness to be "opened" and "developed" (J. *kaitaku*) by the "pioneer settlers" (J. *kaitakusha*). *Wajin* settlement in Shiretoko produced devastating long-term consequences for the survival of Ainu communities in Utoro, Shari, and Rausu, outcomes that cannot be dismissed as a one-time violent massacre such as the Kunasir-Menasi War. Rather, long-term structural changes such as loss of Ainu freedom and ability to nurture families through abusive nature of corvée labor in the contract fisheries; loss of their livelihood through prohibitions on agriculture in 1799 and bans on fishing and hunting in the late 19th century; and consequent loss of reciprocal relations with the nonhuman sentient beings (A: *kamuy*) in their traditional livelihood zones (A: *iwor*), resulted in prolonged Ainu cultural and a steady depopulation. Ainu dependence on *wajin* trade for metalware and Japanese foodstuffs precipitated an over-harvesting of venerated Ainu *kamuy* and, thus, accelerated Ainu vulnerability to *wajin* political and economic agendas, as Brett Walker [6] argues.

Because settler colonialism is a structure rather than a one-time event [2], its aims to “eliminate indigenous societies” regardless of the “presence or absence of the formal apparatus of the state” ([2], p. 393). Based on historical accounts of how the contract fisheries cleaved Ainu society, it seems apparent that in their operation, wittingly or unwittingly, they embodied this logic of elimination in exploiting Ainu labor. Indeed Patrick Wolfe has argued that, “there can be genocide without summary mass murder, as in the case of the continued post-frontier destruction of Indigenous *genoi*” ([2], p. 398). The logic of elimination that permeates the settler colonial process is reflected in efforts to preserve and enshrine the natural environment in Shiretoko, as an environment devoid of indigenous life with its Ainu community almost completely erased.

These historical frameworks for relationships with the land in Shiretoko call attention to a contradiction embedded in Shiretoko’s status as a World Heritage site. On the one hand, the Japanese government embraces this global designation in an attempt to rebrand Shiretoko as the shared heritage of all humanity. Yet, this designation serves to interpolate Ainu within settler colonial imaginaries and legitimate the ongoing erasure of Ainu ancestral and contemporary ontologies in Shiretoko. The remainder of the article turns to Ainu agency in performing relationships with ancestors and place, using Shiretoko as a platform to reassert their relations with the locally specific *kamuy*, including demands for access to local salmon, waterways, and forests. I situate Ainu assertions of ancestral heritage in Shiretoko as attempts to claim an “indigenous space”.

Ainu ecotourism contributes to an expanding “indigenous space” in Shiretoko by countering the settler state’s colonization and analyzing how ecotourism may serve as a strategy to reclaim usage rights and broader access to land and waterways. Following Michael Hathaway, the rubric of “indigenous space” examines how the notion of indigenous identity emerges in differing geopolitical contexts and tracks its evolutions and adaptations to local needs [11]. Thinking through indigenous space reveals how indigeneity is process-oriented, as politically and historically contingent, and altering social relations within self-identified indigenous groups, as well as between non-indigenous and indigenous society ([11], p. 304). For Ainu, indigenous space may be realized in part through reconstituting relations between Ainu and the land, one aspect of a comprehensive undertaking involving co-constitutive forms of memory. These memory practices complement oral, somatic, material, and text-based memories that emphasize Ainu bonds with their ancestors and to land- and water-oriented cultural practices in Hokkaido [12]. Erstwhile tourism was scorned for displaying Ainu as spectacles of difference, whereas Ainu and supporters suggest newly-emergent forms of ecotourism return authorship and representation to the Ainu, themselves.

## 2. Reimagining Shiretoko as World Heritage

In early 2004, the government nominated Shiretoko National Park as Japan’s third World Natural Heritage site. The question of Japan’s natural heritage achieving global recognition had weighty economic and political implications. The nomination papers casually noted that the region’s name was derived from an Ainu toponym, *sir-etok*, meaning “promontory”. Ainu had been neatly disappeared from the topography of Shiretoko:

These bureaucrats and elite administrators from Kasumigaseki simply didn’t get it. Whenever I pointed out that Ainu should be included in the property management committee, they brushed me off: “You know Fujisaki, you keep bringing up Ainu, but Ainu no longer exist, period.” And that was the level of awareness of most Tokyo bureaucrats and anyone educated in Japan—an ordinary response from your average Japanese person. They weren’t simply talking about Shiretoko Ainu, they meant no Ainu in Japan [13].

Fujisaki, an ecotour operator in Shiretoko, was concerned that an important stakeholder in deciding the future of Japan's last wild places was being ignored: the Ainu, indigenous people and custodians of the local flora and fauna for millennia<sup>8</sup>.

This example of the administrative erasure of Ainu from the landscape of Hokkaido and Japan anticipates governmental attitudes toward Ainu in 2005. Yet just three years later in 2008 the government recognized Ainu as indigenous peoples. Dismissing Ainu in the process of Shiretoko's nomination as World Heritage site implied "discrimination by disregard" for some ([3], p. 42). Settler state policy toward Ainu has long focused on disciplining difference and, from 1799 to the present, on facilitating Ainu assimilation into majority Japanese society. Paradoxically, the government also sensationalized Ainu difference in pre-World War Two tourism, focusing on Ainu racial alterity as an index of primitivity and as a foil to Japan's own modernity. As post-1945 ideologues embraced a narrative of Japan the homogeneous, ethnic difference was neutralized, and Ainu were collapsed into the national polity as an assimilated people. Today Ainu efforts to reclaim tourism from former colonialist and spectacle-driven models derive from global indigenous movements and Ainu efforts to self-determine their futures throughout Japan and against the state.

In 2008, Ainu achieved a long-awaited goal: recognition as one of Japan's indigenous peoples. Of significance for Ainu activists who sought indigenous rights as a central component of exercising self-determination within Japan's borders, indigenous rights did not accompany the government's recognition. The Japanese government argues that Ainu "indigeneity" as recognized in Japan, may or may not correlate with international categories of indigenous peoples [14]. Before achieving this recognition, Ainu sought to recover land through ecotourism, and 2005 proved a watershed year. The nomination of Shiretoko as a World Natural Heritage site triggered a series of events leading to IUCN's recommendation that Ainu be included as co-stewards of Shiretoko. Ainu have also introduced place-based experiential tours in several localities across urban and rural Hokkaido. These tours focus on reclaiming Ainu narratives of place, or the particular relationships Ainu and their ancestors engaged with the land. Ainu now seek to reimagine their relationship with the land, as stewards of the land and waterways, agents mediating relations with *kamuy* and ancestors. Advocates of indigenous ecotourism may aim for usufruct or control of Ainu ancestral lands/waterways, yet not all ecotourism presupposes a political platform or assumes a European-based legal framework in asserting its position. The Ainu case confounds assumptions about indigenous activism or cultural revival, because unlike the strategies of indigenous peers in the Americas [15,16], Ainu organizing does not always position itself in opposition to the state. The largest Ainu organization, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido (AAH), receives 80 percent of its funding and top administrators from the Hokkaido government ([17], p. 187), compromising its ability to serve as a mouthpiece for political mobilization.

In July 2004, Katō Tadashi, AAH Director, met the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s nominating representative David Sheppard at a dinner party. Sheppard asked Katō, "Do Hokkaido Ainu feel enthusiastic about nominating Shiretoko for World Heritage status?", and "Are there sites considered sacred inside the property?" Katō responded yes to the first and no to the second ([3], p. 45). While Katō had been elected as the representative of Hokkaido Ainu, many Ainu do not belong to AAH and, thus, did not contribute to the vote. Moreover, Katō had no local Ainu lineage in Shiretoko and thus was in violation of traditional ancestral boundaries in speaking on behalf of Shiretoko Ainu. Angered by Katō's dismissal of sacred sites in Shiretoko, another group of non-Shiretoko Ainu Association members determined that some 53 *casi* sites were dispersed across the Shiretoko peninsula, based on a 1953 archaeological survey. None of these sites had been listed in

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<sup>8</sup> The Shiretoko World Heritage Regional Consultation Committee was established in Utoro to develop a management plan for the property, and Fujisaki served on this committee. This committee included bureaucrats from the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture, and Hokkaido government representatives, representatives from Shari Town, Rausu Town, the local fisheries unions, and local tourism associations, and Fujisaki as a community representative.

the Ministry of the Environment's report to IUCN. This group asserted that *casi*, a type of earthwork formation used for ceremonies, military purposes, and livelihoods, serve as repositories of ancestral memory. As such the association members appropriated these landscapes and their histories to signify Ainu belonging and to reinscribe Ainu sacred spaces in the landscape.

For Ainu, ecotourism provides space for Ainu selfcraft and instrumentalizes transmission of knowledge between knowledge keepers and culture inheritors. Before leading tours today's tour guides must educate themselves due to ongoing settler colonialism and the severing of Ainu ties to the land. Transmission enables the transfer of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) between elders and youth and between ancestors and the living. Anthropologist Fikret Berkes defines TEK as a "body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission", describing relations between humans, and animals and the environment ([18], p. 3). By rejuvenating TEK, Ainu have begun investing themselves in Ainu-*kamuy* (human-nonhuman sentient beings) relations, and now seek to reestablish these relations as continuous rather than as confined to history. More important, this article demonstrates how Ainu embed these interactions within particular topographies, urging a reverence for the *kamuy* of certain locales and emphasizing place-based relations between local communities and the natural relations that sustain them. Ecotourism introduces Ainu cultural practices to outsiders as a demonstration of Ainu rootedness in the land. It also fosters sustained Ainu access to this land, thereby strengthening engagement in ancestral land rites. Indigenous ecotourism enables Ainu to reconfigure their relationships with the land and in future decades may offer recuperation of terrestrial and marine access rights.

### 2.1. Legacies of Ainu Tourism in Hokkaido

Ainu have been synonymous with Hokkaido in the tourist imagination since Kondo and Kimura's imperial mission to Etorof in 1798. Souvenirs from Ezo exemplify Japan's imperial designs in claiming the territory. On their return trip, in Abuta Kimura purchased an elmbark robe (A. *attus*) customized for tourists with a *wajin* style sleeve design. Today this robe is the oldest extant example of Ainu clothing inside Japan [4]. In 1881, the Meiji Emperor and his entourage visited Shiraoui to observe Hokkaido's development progress. Shiraoui Ainu performed a simplified version of the bear spirit-sending ceremony, solidifying Shiraoui as a site of Ainu tourism. Ainu performances thus became part of the standard fare: by presenting traditional dances and songs, Ainu enacted submission to the emperor and, thus, advanced settler colonial erasures. Meanwhile, in 1941 Hokkaido prefectural authorities issued a directive banning all tourist activities, which may have dampened enthusiasm for these practices temporarily ([19], p. 115). Issued during wartime, this directive sought to clamp down on performance of Ainu difference for tourists to magnify Japan's unity under the Emperor. Banning the bear spirit-sending ceremony, dancing, and traditional clothing, reinforced assimilation while promoting Imperialization (J. *kōminka*) through ideological support for the Emperor and patriotism [19].

Meiji era tourist postcards featuring Ainu performing so-called traditional heritage synchronized Ainu within the landscape of Hokkaido, almost as natural formations. By the postwar era, Ainu outside the tourist industry lambasted what they termed "tourist Ainu" for circulating anachronistic images of Ainu, thus fanning racism ([20], pp. 111–18)<sup>9</sup>. In the 1980s a protest against the Japan Tourist Bureau (JTB) brought many popular package tours to a halt. The Anglophone newspaper, *Japan Times*, had published an advertisement, featuring "a fascinating visit to a real Ainu village in Shiraoui to see the ancient customs and culture of the famed hairy Ainu" [21]. Ainu and their supporters carried out denunciation (J. *kyūdan*) hearings against the JTB in protest of the advertisement's inclusion of

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<sup>9</sup> Sidle also notes that in a 1975 survey of Tokyo schoolchildren and university students, all age groups associated Ainu with stereotypical images such as bearded elders, dancing, woodcarving and bears, and hirsuteness. Moreover, survey respondents did not see Ainu as Japanese, but identified them with Native Americans instead ([16], p. 58).

discriminatory language. After six months of hearings, JTB agreed to run an apology and correction both in the *Japan Times* and four major Japanese papers [21,22].

To assuage JTB anxieties about including Ainu villages in its tours, in 2005, the Ainu Association published a “Tour Operator Handbook” to encourage cultural sensitivity toward Ainu protocols. Moreover, enactment of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (1997) raised the stakes for cultural conservation and revival. Tourist communities no longer house the singular representations of Ainu because other communities are now fashioning viable cultural practices [12]. Ainu-authored expressions of ethnic identity have diversified, challenging the vacuum wherein tourist sites were the default public face of all Ainu.

## 2.2. Ainu Senses of Place

Ecotourism, Ainu explain, taps into embedded memory, or the memory held in places. This memory is hidden under layers of *wajin* (ethnic Japanese) settler history in Hokkaido. Taken together memory and place constitute this nascent brand of tourism: indigenous ecotourism. By recasting the history of particular topographies and articulating relationships as mutually constitutive understandings between Ainu and their *kamuy* caretakers in the land and waterways, Ainu ecotours become mapping devices for redefining these territories as Ainu. “No longer can we destroy this nature, this Ainu Mosir. Ainu here managed to live within and use the natural world without destroying it, and we need our youth to experience that history, and ecotours provide one means”, ecotour guide Ishii Ponpe urged [23].

Ecotours shift the experience of the surrounding environment away from perception as an aesthetically-pleasing space of consumption (the tourist lens) or as a resource depot for harvesting and commodifying (the capitalistic, colonialist lens). Rather, they emplace visitors in a vast landscape of human-deity relations. The surrounding landscapes become animated through Ainu narratives as related by tour guides, revealing new relationships between humans and their supernatural hosts. Ecotourism provides a context for reenacting the historical Ainu worldview through engaging in wild food gathering and, in future iterations, hunting, and fishing. Tour operators seek to relearn subsistence practices and inscribe Ainu cultural logics onto the land through stewardship and language. However, contemporary Ainu practices are not and cannot be identical to their ancestors’ ways, nor can they be limited to an isolated perspective. Through ecotourism, guides construct Ainu practices anew. Guests are asked to suspend their taken-for-granted assumptions and reimagine Hokkaido from an Ainu perspective.

Ecotour operators describe these tours as exercising “soft power” by fostering a base of supporters sympathetic to Ainu values who will support Ainu land claims and other politically sensitive issues in Hokkaido, without making waves among detractors [13]. Moreover, ecotours offer much more than a route toward economic stability through employment for Ainu youth. Rather, they offer the possibility of rejuvenation: transforming Ainu relations with the land toward renewed stewardship and reciprocity, of being looked after by the land, rather than merely caring for the land. Operators present ecotours as sustainable, masking more overtly political applications of ecotourism, including future land claims. Finally, ecotours may provide a context for dramatizing narratives of interdependence between Ainu and *kamuy*, as a pedagogical tool for majority Japanese society today.

Two examples illustrate how memory sites rouse emotional responses in contemporary Ainu. In the “era of the ancestors”, a nostalgic expression Ainu use to describe the precolonial era, Ainu villages clustered around riverbanks. Each community claimed exclusive usufruct to fishing, hunting, and plant gathering in a broad region surrounding the watershed, called *iwor* (A. historical harvesting region) ([24], pp. 56–68). Legal hunting and fishing for Ainu were truncated in the 1870s and replaced by agriculture and stringent assimilation policies, yet the concept of *iwor* continued to regulate territorial boundaries through the early 20th century. (In Shiretoko, early settler farmers did not arrive until the early 20th century.) In the Ainu worldview, the *kamuy* inhabiting the watershed in the terrestrial form of fur-bearing animals, fish, and plants, were understood to provide protection and

sustenance for each community. Each *iwor* zone was perceived as belonging, not to Ainu but to *kamuy* who, based on ceremony and relations with humans, chose when to present themselves in the guise of a deer, bear, salmon, or owl ([24], pp. 77–78). Ainu understood their relations with these *kamuy* in a metaphysical sense: animals allowed themselves to be hunted to provide sustenance for Ainu, and Ainu in turn liberated the souls of *kamuy* spirits by harvesting these animals. In return, each village was expected to cultivate reciprocal relations with local *kamuy* spirits, through ceremony and exercising restraint in the hunt. Relations between Ainu and their *kamuy* were spatially oriented, based on contiguity with each Ainu community. Village locations were determined by salmon spawning areas, for example, and these regions were named and assigned to particular settlements. Likewise, *iwor* groups built deer and bear huts to mark their hunting grounds. Hunting, plant gathering, and fishing in another village's *iwor* required formal permission accompanied by ritual. Visitors were expected to greet the *kamuy* of the river or mountain and offer carved *inaw* branches to appease the local spirits. Fishermen were expected to leave a small portion of their catch as a gesture of gratitude to the host community.

Anthropologist Hitoshi Watanabe argues that Ainu claims on local resources were not driven by economic interests but stemmed from a metaphysical orientation toward preserving a delicate ecological balance between humans and the spirits to whom the river and watershed regions belonged ([24], p. 77). Fear of divine reprisal and the threat of starvation motivated Ainu to abide by these protocols and to mete out punishments against any who disregarded these agreed-on conditions. This delicate balance began to crumble as early capitalism spawned proliferation of *wajin*-run trading posts in the 17th century, posts that were eventually replaced by the contract fisheries. *Iwor* communities began to compete in harvesting animals to trade with *wajin*, occasionally escalating into violent warfare and indelibly changing the landscape and relations with the guardian *kamuy* of their lands, who became increasingly commodified ([6], p. 52).

### 2.3. Ecotourism, A Vessel of Recovery

In recent years, ecotourism programs across Japan have fostered dynamic relationships between guests and hosts. Participation-based or experiential tourism has gained popularity, and package tours have declined, especially among the younger generation. Tours now compel visitors to take on participatory roles, occasionally involving risk, and to interact with living organisms, including human, animal, and plant life. These experiential programs provide for a more spontaneous and dynamic interaction with place, as opposed to static templates accessible through museum showcases or passive consumption of dance performances and model villages in Ainu tourist locales.

Chief among these new brands of tourism is ecotourism, combining multiple themes: understanding of new terrains and ecologies; environmental awareness; the potential for sustainable development through low-impact, localized tours; a range of experiential modes; and through the medium of indigenous ecotourism, cultivation and revival of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Here tradition as a key component of TEK should not be construed as essentialist or static. On the contrary, students of TEK describe it as flexible and cumulative, constantly adapting to environmental changes and human needs. TEK focuses on a body of knowledge that has evolved through relations with a particular geographic area and its local ecosystem, and thus TEK frequently invokes the ecological knowledge of communities self-identifying as indigenous, but it may also include non-indigenous communities who depend on local ecosystems for livelihood [18]. For example, the government of Nunavut now draws on *Inuit qaujimaqatuqangit* (IQ) as an ethical guide and policy model for honoring Inuit cultural heritage, enabling self-determination and designing government and society according to Inuit value systems ([25], p. 98).

### 2.4. Indigenous Ecotourism for Profit: Shiretoko

Japan initially applied for Shiretoko's designation as a World Heritage natural site in 2004, but based on the assumption that Ainu no longer resided in the region, the national government failed

to include Ainu representatives in their bid. The decision to omit Ainu members reinforces an active discourse of erasure, an erasure that achieves legitimacy by reinscribing and normalizing *wajin* presence as proper stewards of the landscape. However, the landscapes of Shiretoko are branded with the memory of Ainu and Tobinitai cultures<sup>10</sup>, and living Ainu seek to renew relationships with these lands. Ainu ancestral presence is literally hewn into the topography, lingering in toponyms. As described earlier, Shiretoko is drawn from an Ainu word, meaning “the place where the earth protrudes.” The landscape is dotted with earthworks known as *casi*, whose structure and purpose evolved across many centuries ([26], pp. 94–95)<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, supporters argue that including indigenous peoples in World Natural Heritage property management plans is widely accepted internationally, because indigenous practices of ecological sustainability helped to protect these ecosystems, preserving them for global posterity [27]. Notably, in their World Natural Heritage application government boosters suppressed the histories of settler colonial violence that led to depopulation and expulsion of Ainu communities from this region.

Refusing to be ignored in the nomination process, a group of Ainu and *wajin* formed the Shiretoko Indigenous Peoples Ecotourism Research Union (SIPETRU) in April 2005 to develop indigenous ecotours<sup>12</sup>. SIPETRU urged the IUCN to formalize indigenous Ainu participation in the property management plan. Japan’s largest Ainu organization, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, criticized the government’s failure to include it in the nomination process in a speech at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). This statement urged support for ecotourism, removal of the erosion control dams which block spawning salmon, and endorsement of salmon fishing and the salmon welcoming ceremony, *Asir Cep Nomi* [27]. Another group, *Uhanokka no Kai*, visited the IUCN headquarters in Geneva in person and urged the union to incorporate Ainu in the management plan. UNESCO, a body reputed to be vigilant of the relationships between indigenous peoples and heritage sites, responded that it would positively consider Ainu participation [3].

After much negotiation, Shiretoko was selected as a World Heritage site in 2005. In its technical evaluation, IUCN outlined conditions for maintaining the property’s World Heritage status, such as removing the erosion control dams and expanding the protected marine areas to a three-kilometer radius, together with incorporating Ainu as co-stewards. The IUCN deemed Shiretoko desirable as a World Natural Heritage site not because of striking natural beauty; rather, it was chosen because of the particular mix of flora and fauna linking the terrestrial and marine environments. In other words, the ecological balance and symbiotic linkages between terrestrial and marine life render Shiretoko unique in this North Pacific environment. One condition for Shiretoko to retain its status as a World Heritage site was to remove salmon-obstructing dams ([28,29])<sup>13</sup>. Restoring ecological balance is critical, not simply for the ecology of Shiretoko but is a key concern for Ainu as well. Erosion control dams that impede salmon spawning upstream negatively impact bears, eagles, and Blakiston’s fish owls who then suffer from a dearth of foodstuffs in autumn. Ainu themselves are robbed of the very food that mediates their relations with the nonhuman world. The Meiji government stripped Ainu of salmon fishing rights in 1871, a legal prohibition that continues today, with the exception of limited access to salmon for ceremonial purposes.

In its technical evaluation, IUCN noted that Shiretoko bears an Ainu name, “reverently called by the Ainu People as ‘sir.etok’”, translated as “the end of mother earth” [29]. IUCN also recognized the importance of Shiretoko for “traditional inhabitants” and recommended that “the traditional wisdom and skills of local Ainu [be incorporated to] realize sustainable use of the natural environment” ([29], p. 31.) Finally the evaluation urged that Ainu be given the opportunity to

<sup>10</sup> Archaeologists distinguish Ainu culture (thirteenth century to the present) from Tobinitai Culture (ninth to the thirteenth centuries), understood to incorporate from both Ainu and Okhotsk cultures [26].

<sup>11</sup> *Casi* may be demarcated by moatlike trenches or earthen walls of fortification and thus leave a record in the soil structure [26].

<sup>12</sup> SIPETRU is drawn from an Ainu term meaning “big river path.”

<sup>13</sup> At present, nine out of forty-four rivers are still dammed.

assist with property management, specifically in developing ecotourism activities “which celebrate the traditional customs and uses of the nominated property” ([29], p. 31). Without access to oral histories or the ability to speak with those raised in this area, ecotour planners have focused on resources they do control: the archaeological record, memories of TEK, and oral literature. “Soft power” marshalled by ecotours may conceal more politicized agendas, while ecotours generate tools used to leverage restitution of waterways, land, and marine areas. SIPETRU aims to promote indigenous ecotourism, develop a guide program that engages indigenous peoples’ culture and the restoration of Shiretoko’s ecological balance, support employment and training of indigenous guides, and foster sustainable ecotourism that conserves the natural environment of Shiretoko [27]. *Casi*, for example, have emerged as focal points for ecotours because they condense the lived histories and agency of Ainu ancestors in sculpting the landscape of Shiretoko. *Casi* represented as sacred spaces may provide a basis for reclaiming land, according to SIPETRU. By linking the *casi* in Shiretoko with those dotting the landscapes of Hokkaido as a whole, advocates seek to broaden support for reviving indigenous rights across Hokkaido, as Maori communities have achieved in New Zealand ([3], p. 51).

### 3. Analysis: Weighing the Benefits of Ecotourism

As a new medium of representation, indigenous ecotourism places Ainu at the center, enabling them to author and control the content and delivery of messages about themselves. Proponents describe ecotourism as economically empowering, generating employment opportunities based on *Ainu meshi*, (literally feeding oneself through Ainu identity), or the ability to levy income by linking ethnic identity with livelihood. Yet the economic benefits of ecotourism are still minimal, as most ecotours outside Shiretoko across Hokkaido generate barely enough profit to cover supply costs. Ecotourism does cultivate new publics. Urban Ainu may benefit from joining ecotours to engage with the TEK of their ancestors; yet most ecotours attract a *wajin* demographic with the freedom and financial resources to travel.

Ecotourism may appear far removed from wildlife management or co-stewardship of Shiretoko, but it allows urban Ainu youth to learn the TEK of their ancestors, restore relationships with the *kamuy* of these regions, hone skills as naturalists, and reembody this knowledge, through embedding these practices in their bodies. It provides a context for a host of practices to resignify Ainu. The term *resignifying* suggests that these groups make choices about how to interpret and claim an Ainu identity anew. Proponents argue that ecotourism has the potential to restore the ancestral Ainu worldview through wild food gathering, relearning subsistence practices for cultural transmission, and inscribing Ainu cultural logics onto the land through stewardship and language. As one ecotour guide, Y-san explained, when Ainu youth are given the opportunity to work as nature guides, sustained access to non-urban spaces provides a context for crafting “sensibilities” as Ainu [30]. All life forms have stories, in Y-san’s view, and storytelling helps cultivate awareness of the interconnectedness of all living beings and in turn urges greater consideration for others. Memories of the land transmitted through oral literature are today being recombined and invented afresh for this generation. Young Ainu may revisit traditional narrative forms to foster Ainu identities anew through linking them to relations with *kamuy*. This is what Y-san envisions as an Ainu contribution for Japan toward advancing sustainability and balance with the nonhuman world.

#### *Critique and Remaining Challenges*

Ecotours have become increasingly popular and attractive in recent years because of their alleged commitment to sustainability, their engagement with local communities, and the intimate knowledge of local places implicit in their design [31]. According to ecotourism models, these tours should bring economic and environmental benefit to local communities through encouraging sustainable economic development and minimal consumption of local resources. They should be sourced by local food and accommodations, and vendors should be monitored to ensure minimal local impact. Ainu ecotours have not managed to achieve this yet: most rely on short-term stays by tourists flying in

from Tokyo and, thus, leave a significant carbon footprint, but they do invest in the local economy and rely on local merchants for food and lodging. The impetus for designing ecotourism programs has not emerged organically from Ainu themselves but has been generated by Ainu and non-Ainu urban intellectuals and activists. In Shiretoko, indigenous ecotour programs have been organized primarily by urban transplants and led by urban Ainu guides housed in a locally based organization, rather than percolating upwards from the local grassroots [13].

Ainu involvement in Shiretoko continues today primarily through the architecture of ecotourism. Despite the IUCN recommendation that Ainu be included in management of the World Natural Heritage property through ecotourism, environment ministry personnel reported in February 2007 that they had no knowledge of this recommendation. Instead, they were preoccupied with requirements to rid the area of erosion control dams. To date, the Shiretoko experiment in indigenous ecotourism supports one full-time Ainu guide, with income supplemented by conventional ecotours offered by the host company, Shinra. SIPETRU aims to start a training program and cultivate future guides within the local community, seeing the current guides as a bridge. This program has not managed to establish strong links with local descendants of the Ainu community there. This stems in part from the fact that a publicly identified Ainu community no longer exists in Shiretoko. Some Ainu descendants of the Shiretoko region who now live outside Shari and Rausu have been vocal opponents of ecotour programs, lodging complaints with local officials when Sapporo Ainu conducted ritual prayers on ancestral land ([3], p. 47). These persons have expressed a sense of entitlement and desire to control the narrative of Ainu history inside Shiretoko because of ancestral connections there.

As these instances illustrate, stakeholders embrace competing visions about how the Ainu-Shiretoko narrative should be imagined. Although tour guides author the content of individual tours, central government staffers and tour companies choreograph ecotourism management. The concept of ecotourism has not been widely circulated in Japanese society and at present there are no local or national standards for indigenous ecotours. The Shiretoko examples I have cited cannot speak for a broad swath of indigenous ecotourism across Japan, but they illustrate the salience of indigenous ecotourism among Hokkaido Ainu communities.

#### 4. Meditations on the Utility of Plants

This article has sought to address two aims: first, to assess how indigenous ecotourism fosters the growth of an indigenous space inside Japan and thus counters the imaginary of settler colonial conservationism; and second, to analyze how indigenous ecotours enact performances of TEK to further usage access and reclamation of land and waterways. Today's ecotours seek to raise awareness of Ainu culture, history, and relations with the natural world, thereby addressing the question of indigenous space, while cultivating a sympathetic public and support for rights revival among non-Ainu. In contrast, the attitudes of central government administrators in rejecting a living Ainu presence from this land effectively reinscribe the settler colonial project and clinch this bureaucratic erasure. Ecotourism promoters, Ainu and non-Ainu supporters, seek to counter the continued erasure of Ainu ancestral and contemporary relationships with local *kamuy*, in spite of a *wajin* conservationism that seeks to imagine Shiretoko as an idealized pristine space, devoid of human interference. This *wajin* conservatism remains pragmatic in recognizing the centrality of the fishing industry as an economic base for the surrounding community and, thus the government's emphasis on restoring so-called natural spaces is limited to areas within national park boundaries.

Meanwhile, the second objective, linking usage to access rights, may be suspended indefinitely. While land reclamation is compelling for urban activists, for rural Ainu residents, this question is strewn with hurdles. Moreover, the national government has not indicated any willingness to negotiate over land rights, in part because of a delicate balance between local economic concerns and the mandates of the IUCN. The case of salmon illustrates this tension. Ainu may have difficulty finding sympathy from local Ainu communities on this point. Salmon represent a financial and symbolic investment for commercial fisherfolk (including Ainu fisherfolk) because they are no longer wild: 95%

of Hokkaido's salmon are produced through artificial insemination. Hatchlings are scattered into the ocean, and when salmon return to spawn, fishermen feel a sense of entitlement toward salmon they personally hatched. When approached to issue salmon permits for a First Salmon Ceremony, one Ainu SIPETRU representative who runs a commercial fishery, responded, "Absolutely not, we can't allow Ainu traditional fishing in our river." While this person identifies as Ainu, he has refused to authorize a salmon catch, because of the economic sensitivity of this issue in the fisheries union [13].

At stake is not so much ethnicity, as the focus on *Ainu* ecotours suggests; rather, the viability of indigenous ecotourism consists in spatial relations, in human associations with locality and place. As another Ainu SIPETRU member suggested, "The idea of teaching people about weeds for cash is a tough sell. For Honshu people those might be endangered or rare plants, but here in eastern Hokkaido they're simply weeds, obstacles to our work as farmers and fishermen" [32]. As T-san implies, a slippage between rural and urban perceptions of the landscape and notions of value drives a wedge between local and urban initiatives. The transformative potential of indigenous ecotourism—to recover land, ancestral values, pride, livelihood, and sacred spaces—remains bound within the imaginations of urban intellectuals who inaugurated this and other ecotourism programs. For rural dwellers, regardless of ethnic identity, the natural environment is frequently reduced to exchange value, a calculation of how natural resources may be commodified. Exchange values are determined at the apex of the economic system, in a top-down fashion, as are activist's visions of ecotours as a solution to Ainu dispossession and unemployment. Approximately 17 percent of contemporary Ainu across Hokkaido are employed in primary industries including fishing, agriculture, forestry, and mining [33]. Their labor generates value and livelihood; weeds simply aggravate.

Categorizing natural resources based on their exchange value continues the colonial logic that bolstered commodification of fur-bearing animals, leading to the breakdown of the *iwor* system and fomenting armed conflict between neighboring *iwor* districts in the 17th century, precipitating Shakushain's War<sup>14</sup>. Under assimilation policies and Japan's ongoing settler colonialism, Ainu economic survival remains embroiled in a system of capitalist values. Still, many Ainu remain ambivalent about a system that commodifies their labor and transforms wilderness into fields of production. Ecotour guide Ishii Ponpe, who worked in forestry in his youth, witnessed the clearing of Hokkaido's deciduous forests and their reemergence as coniferous tree plantations, followed by DDT being sprayed on the trees to eliminate rodents. The pesticide precipitated stinging nasal membranes, animal corpses in the forest, and fish kills in the rivers [23]. In contrast to economic relations based on exchange value, heritage Ainu worldviews find value especially in plants with medicinal or edible qualities. Under an indigenous value scheme, plants containing healing, nutritive, or protective properties were attributed names, while others were generically called grasses (*kina*). With this ancestral value scheme, reciprocity with flora and fauna demanded attitudes of humility and prudence, to use resources sparingly and leave the root structures intact.

Returning to his meditation on weeds, T-san suggested, "These weeds are around us so much, it's hard to see that they might be important. Ecotours force us to recognize that the environment is what actually matters. Fostering awareness locally, perhaps through ecotours designed for locals is what we need" [32]. Yet for the moment the need for income trumps indigenous values. With success in ecotourism and quantifiable proof that a person can generate income from "talking weeds", local Ainu may eventually choose careers in ecotourism [32]. In the pre-World Natural Heritage era, most Hokkaido residents, including Ainu, conflated Shiretoko with the rest of rural Hokkaido as an underdeveloped backwater. Starting in 2004, the government's hyper-focus on the area and an anticipated influx of cash precipitated a gold rush mentality, and many rural Ainu communities saw

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<sup>14</sup> Shakushain's War (1669) was a conflict which escalated due to tensions over access to a hunting-fishing territory, or *iwor*, in southern Hokkaido near present-day Shin-Hidaka. While it is often historically described as divided along ethnic lines between *wajin* and Ainu, recent scholarship was demonstrated that ethnic solidarities were more fractured than often recognized [6].

ecotours as yet another money- and land-grab. To ground relations between urban Ainu nature guides and their rural counterparts confounded by this wilderness fetishization, T-san calls for sustained focus on local communities, drawing them in through communication, planning, and implementation. If local communities are simply sidelined, the ecotour will remain an exercise in outsiders consuming the local, again violating *iwor* boundaries. As rural localities such as Shiretoko become converted into newly indigenous spaces, exchange value-based economic models may gradually be superseded by indigenous value systems. Whether these relationships are recast in the legal vernacular of land rights or not, relearning ancestral practice and honoring local protocols will gradually restore the memory of these landscapes and self-determination in order for local communities to imagine future relationships.

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