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## Save the dugong - stop the US airbase

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A gentle dugong near Okinawa, Japan.

Okinawa, Japan — "It is 8:30 am and I and 30 activists have been sitting on drilling platform #4 for an hour and a half. We can see workers from the Defense Construction Agency gathering on the beach of Camp Schwab, the US Marine Corp base at Henoko, Okinawa. They are about to board a chartered fishing boat and come out and try to drill the first of 64 holes into the life sustaining coral reef. But for the 300th consecutive day, we are not going to let them." - Yuka Ozaki, 500m off the coast of Japan.

In 1996, construction of a US Marine Corps airbase for helicopters at Henoko, Okinawa, off the coast of Japan was agreed. The planned 2,600-meter runway complete with hangars, control towers and fuel storage was even being funded by Japanese taxpayers to the tune of US\$10 billion. That US\$10 billion is set to pay for the destruction of the habitat of sea life such as the gentle dugong - only 12 of which are confirmed to remain in Japanese waters. The beautiful Okinawa reef is home to Japan's last remaining population of critically endangered dugong, as well as other marine mammals and sea turtles. The UN Environment Programme has called for the creation of a marine reserve to protect the dugong. Instead the plan is to dynamite the reef and build the runway through it.

Local opposition has been so strong that construction was not started until late 2004. In 1997, local people voted overwhelmingly to reject the base, but the local mayor was forced by the central government to agree to the project. He resigned in disgrace after signing the agreement.

Courageous local residents, however, have so far been successful in preventing the drilling of test holes into the sensitive coral reef. Every day for the last 300 days they have occupied the drilling towers about half a kilometre offshore, preventing any further construction.

One 84-year-old local man said, "We know for sure, that building the airbase is not the right thing to do. There are a plenty of sea creatures which are supporting our life here. We always appreciate the richness of ocean life: we have top shell, octopus, magaki-shell and seaweed. Once the base is built, there will be no future for our children. I can't let it disappear."

Today, the Rainbow Warrior arrives to support these local residents and try to ensure a US military base doesn't mean the demise of the Okinawa dugong.