

As U.S. Airbase Construction Starts in Okinawa, Legal Action Aims to Save Endangered Dugongs

By [Center For Biological Diversity](#)

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As workers prepare to begin construction of a new U.S. military base in Henoko Bay in Okinawa, Japan, U.S. environmentalists are gearing up for legal action and blasting the destructive project. The planned base could wipe out the [Okinawa dugong](#), one of Earth's most endangered marine mammals.

As early as Friday ships could start dumping tons of dirt and sand into Henoko Bay. This landfill is part of a process of destroying and paving over many acres of rich coral and seagrass habitat crucial to the handful of surviving Okinawa dugongs, a manatee relative.

But the U.S. Department of Defense's base plan still faces legal action by the Center for Biological Diversity and other U.S. conservation groups. Under the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act, American officials must avoid or mitigate harm to places or things of cultural significance to another country. Dugongs are cultural icons in Okinawa.

"We will never stop fighting to protect the Okinawa dugong from extinction at the hands of the U.S. military," said **Peter Galvin**, cofounder of the Center. "This base is an environmental atrocity. Wiping out these gentle, culturally important animals would forever stain America's international reputation."

Briefing begins in January in the groups' appeal to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which [ruled last year](#) that the issue deserved a full hearing. [The appeal](#) challenges an adverse district court ruling.

The U.S. base is also opposed by Okinawa's new governor, Denny Tamaki, who has strongly urged Japan's Defense Ministry to halt construction. Okinawa's assembly recently approved holding a popular referendum on the base.

Background

A [landmark 2017 ruling](#) by the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals affirmed the right of conservation groups to sue to compel the U.S. military to fully consider the base's impacts. The plaintiffs, including the Center, Turtle Island Restoration Network and Okinawan residents, are represented by Earthjustice.

Dugongs have long been revered by native Okinawans and even celebrated as "sirens" that

bring friendly warnings of tsunamis. The dugong is listed as an object of national cultural significance under Japan's Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Under the U.S. National Historic Protection Act and international law, the United States must avoid or mitigate harm to places or things of cultural significance to another country.

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