

Three years after inscription of Iriomote Island on the World Heritage List

Stagnant visitation controls and creation of new tourism business opportunity inside the properties



May 2024

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Contents

- 1. Background 4
- 2. Restriction of tourists’ entry into Iriomote Island..... 4
 - 2.1 2022 draft of the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan and its problems 4
 - 2.2 Trend of visitation and rental cars tourists use on Iriomote Island..... 5
 - 2.3 The final version of “Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan” and its problems 7
 - 2.4 Discussion 8
- 3 Opening up the camping and bonfire tour business in Iriomote Island..... 8
 - 3.1 Camping and bonfires in Iriomote Island 8
 - 3.2 Lack of consistency with the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan..... 9
 - 3.3 Review process lacking transparency and public participation 11
 - 3.4 Discussion 11
- 4 Recommendation..... 12

1. Background

On July 26, 2021, the World Heritage Committee adopted Decision: 44 COM 8B.5 (referred to as “WHC decision” hereinafter) that inscribes Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, Northern part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island, Japan, on the World Heritage List, requesting the State Party to take immediate steps to improve the protection and management of the property. The requests include “Capping or reducing levels of tourist visitation from current levels, especially on Iriomote Island, until a critical evaluation of tourism carrying capacity and impacts can be conducted and integrated into a revised tourism management plan”.¹

In response to the recommendations, the Government of Japan (referred to as “GoJ” hereinafter) submitted a report to the World Heritage Centre on December 1, 2022, for a review by IUCN².

The Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund (JTEF) and Yamaneko Patrol (YP) published a report in December 2022 which assessed the report of GoJ and urged WHC to request that GoJ take further action³.

One year and four months have passed since then, and the 46th meeting of WHC will be held on July 21–31, 2024 in Delhi, India.

This report will assess the development of the management and protection of the properties that includes improvement of the relevant plans and implementation of the measures, which were made by the State Party, give insights on an emerging issue, and provide recommendations.

2. Restriction of tourists’ entry into Iriomote Island

2.1 2022 draft of the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan and its problems

The 2022 draft of the “Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan”⁴ (referred to “2022 draft plan” hereinafter) adopted the “current level”: specifically, 290,000 visitors identified in 2019 as the baseline for the level of visitation. And, it set a visitor’s number of 1,200 per day, based on clean water supply capacity of the Island, as the critical limit for the level of

¹ Decision: 44 COM 8B.5

<https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2021/whc-21-44com-18-en.pdf>

² Decision: 44 COM 8B.5

<https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2021/whc-21-44com-18-en.pdf>

³ https://www.itef.jp/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2212Report-to-IUCN_E.pdf

⁴ This plan was referred to in the GoJ’s report submitted to WHC on December 1, 2022.

<https://kyushu.env.go.jp/okinawa/amami-okinawa/world-natural-heritage/reports/index.htm>

tourist entry into the Island. The 2022 draft plan also suggested that it aims to prevent visitors from increasing by 10% or more than the previous year. Regarding the measures to secure the critical limit, the 2022 draft plan suggested that individual travelers will be encouraged to visit the island during the off-season and that tourism businesses will be invited to voluntarily coordinate on time schedules of group tours.

JTEF/YP expressed concerns about the 2022 draft plan as follows⁵:

i) If the critical limit of 1,200 visitors as the daily upper limit is applied without specific capping based on an yearly upper limit, in theory, 438,000 visitors in total are to be allowed to enter the Island in a year (1,200 people x 365 days), which corresponds to 1.5 times of the “current level” and even exceeds the historic record high⁶. Such a way of designating a critical limit won’t contribute to restrict the tourist visitation under the “current level” based on the visitation throughout a year.

ii) Moreover, the heavy tourist seasons at regular times are based on customer’s demand in terms of timing for visitation that is generally inflexible. The working generation cannot rush to Iriomote Island other than for their summer vacation and the long national holiday seasons; while most of the retirement generation is commonly touring the island as part of a group-tour to escape the cold winter seasons. The main entry to the island is through the ferry liner between Ishigaki Island and Iriomote Island. This liner’s transportation capacity reaches to 2,500⁷, more than twice ‘the per day critical limit’, so that it can easily satisfy visitors’ demand in the busiest seasons. Given this reality, it does not serve as a method of limiting tourist visitation or encourage individual tourists and tourism businesses to voluntarily rearrange their tour schedules.

2.2 Trend of visitation and rental cars tourists use on Iriomote Island

Figure 1 shows the changes in the number of tourists who entered Iriomote Island and the number of road collisions of Iriomote cats between 1989⁸ and 2023.

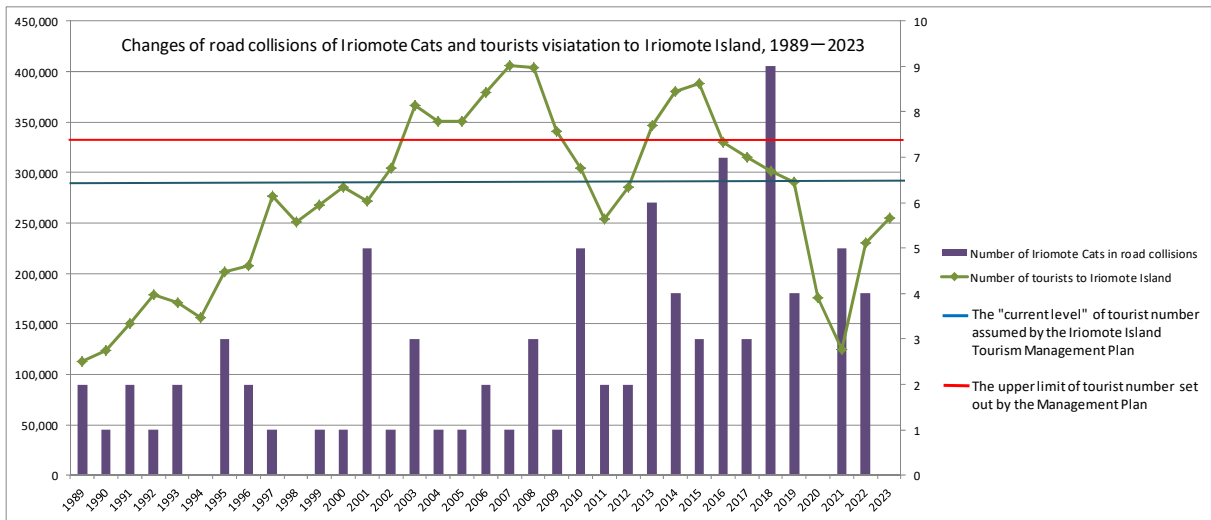
⁵ https://www.jtef.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2212Report-to-IUCN_J.pdf

⁶ 405,646 tourists were recorded in 2007. Taketomi Town website: <https://www.town.taketomi.lg.jp/administration/toukei/kankonyuiki/>

⁷ The 2022 draft of the “Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan” distributed at the meeting of the working group for revising the tourism management plan in Iriomote Island on June 7, 2022 as Document 2-2

⁸ The annual data on the number of tourists who entered in Iriomote Island are available on the Taketomi Town website since 1989. <https://www.town.taketomi.lg.jp/administration/toukei/>

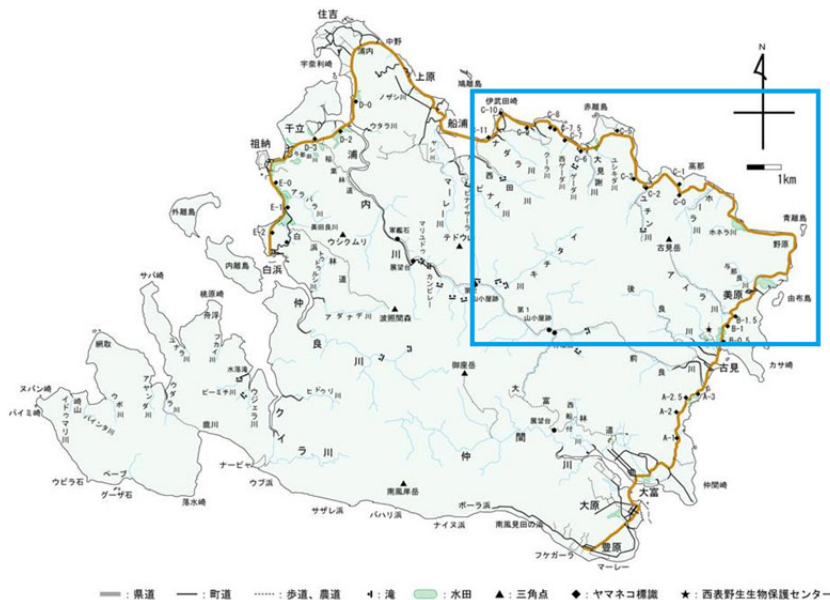
Figure 1



The number of tourists in 2020, affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic, suddenly decreased 40% to below 200 thousand in 25 years. After a further stagnant in 2021, the level of visitation started to rapidly recover in 2022 and recorded 254,540, demonstrating that it is steadily back to the level in 2019.

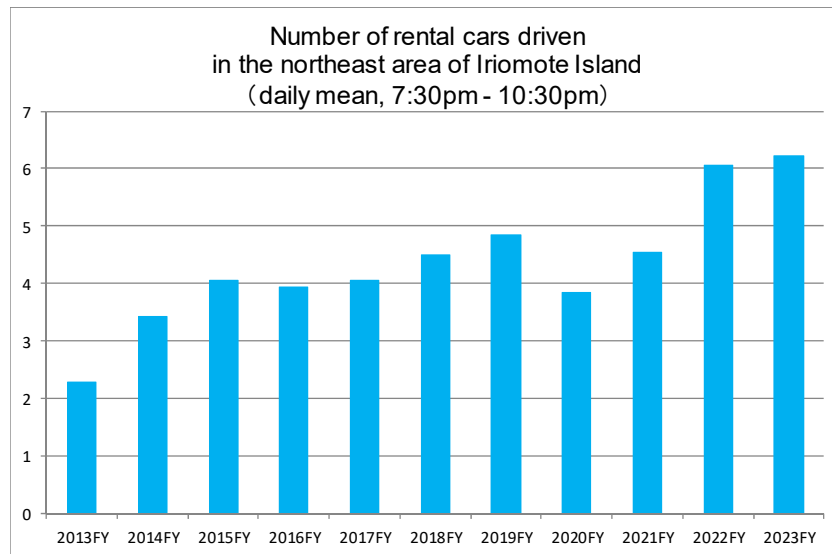
Figure 2 indicates the northeast part of the Prefectural road, the “north coast road” area highlighted in blue, where road collisions with Iriomote cats have frequently occurred. Figure 3 shows each year’s (April to March) average number of rental cars a day that were identified from 19:30 to 22:30, within the “north coast road.”

Figure 2



The Prefectural road runs half around Iriomote Island. The blue line shows the area in which YP has been conducting a traffic survey along the “north coast road”.

Figure 3



The data are based on the traffic survey made by YP every year. The survey has been conducted approximately 100 days a year. In 2023, the survey was done for 87 days.

The number of rental cars has increased over the last decade and reached a record-high in 2023 (April 2023–March 2024), which is 1.7 times more than a decade ago. It is anticipated that the volume of traffic created by tourists will expand further, increasing the risks of road collision of Iriomote cats.

2.3 The final version of “Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan” and its problems

The final version of the “Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan” was published in March 2023.⁹ The main change from the 2022 draft plan was that an upper limit of yearly visitors¹⁰ was newly set at 330,000, in which an increase within 10 % of the baseline number of 290,000 in 2019. The critical limit of 1,200, as well as the measures to control the visitors under the critical limit was not changed. The Plan said that “an ‘Ethical Tourism Calendar’ will be developed and updated every month to give the information to tourists via websites of the ferry companies and ‘Taketomi Town Iriomote Island Ecotourism Promotion Council’ about how crowded it is on each day.” As suggested in the 2022 draft, the effectiveness of the proposed measure still highly depends on the good intention of tourists and tour agents. Even this “Ethical Tourism Calendar” which is the only control measure in the Plan, has not been announced as of May 17, 2024 and there is no specific plan to get it up and running by the end of next March.

⁹ <https://www.pref.okinawa.jp/site/kankyo/shizen/isan/iriomotejimakankoukanri.html>

¹⁰ Okinawa Prefecture, who is responsible for the Plan, finally agreed with setting a yearly upper limit in response to the argument from local representatives and YP at a meeting of the Iriomote Island Sub-committee of the WH Regional Liaison Committee which was held in February 2023.

2.4 Discussion

The problems identified in the 2022 draft plan have not been addressed in the final version of the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan; it is unlikely that the Plan can effectively control the overall visitation to the Island in the near future.

Thus, the Plan should be revised again to readjust both critical limit (1,200 people per day) and annual upper limit (330,000), and to develop a specific measure to keep the number of tourists below the revised limits on both daily and yearly basis in a more active way.

Effectiveness of a measure entirely depends on establishing controls over the use of the ferries that connect Iriomote Island with Ishigaki Island. The Ministry of Environment should, in cooperation with Okinawa Prefecture and Taketomi Town, negotiate with the ferry companies that manage regular voyages between those islands to agree to accept such controls, and then dialogue with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism on the approval of the change of the conditions of carriage that the ferry companies have to compile with.¹¹ In 2020, the “Tourism Management Public-Private Partnership Agreement” was signed by six parties including the Ministry of Environment, Okinawa Prefecture, Taketomi Town, and three shipping companies, with the aim of reducing the number of visitors to the Island above the critical limit (note: It means 1,200 people per day), leveling the tourist number of entry and the timing of arrival to the island, and securing livelihood routes for the islanders.¹²

3 Opening up the camping and bonfire tour business in Iriomote Island

3.1 Camping and bonfires in Iriomote Island

Taketomi Town has so far requested or given administrative guidance to all residents and businesses not to camp or set up bonfires (other than in designated areas such as campgrounds) in Iriomote Island. The “Iriomote Island Overall Concept for Promoting Ecotourism” (referred to as the “Overall Concept” hereinafter), which was certified by GoJ in September 2022, also states that “camping, bonfires, etc. are prohibited in principle.” The background to this is thought to be that camping and bonfires carry considerable risks, including missing and accidental death/injury of the campers, damage to valuable natural ecosystems due to fire, and litter.

¹¹ Under the Marine Transportation Act, while general passenger liner operators are obligated to accept transportation (Article 12) and should not discriminate against users (Article 13), it will be possible to implement certain boarding restrictions if necessary changes to the “conditions of carriage” are approved by the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Article 12, Paragraph 1, Item 3).

¹² Yaeyama-nippou article dated on March 28, 2020 “Controls over visitation to Iriomote Island considered by Taketomi Town and ferry companies”

Figure 4



- Camping and bonfires are prohibited except in emergencies.
- Avoid using mountain trails at night.

Reference: Taketomi Town Iriomote Island Ecotourism Promotion Council website

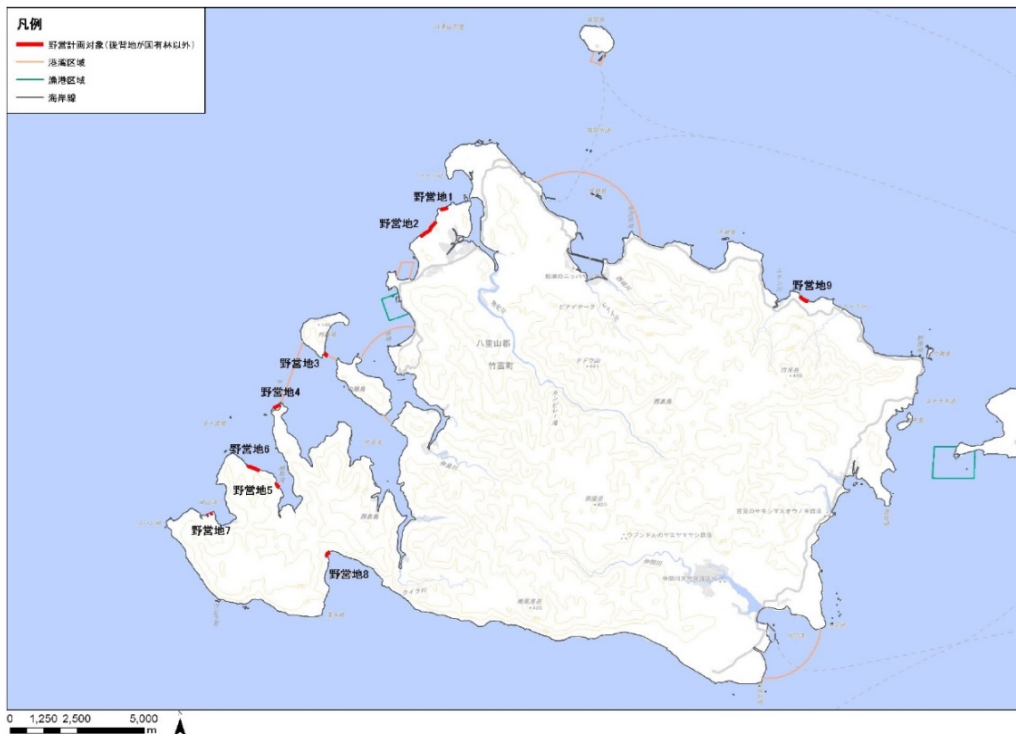
However, the Ministry of the Environment's Iriomote Nature Conservation Officer's Office and Taketomi Town, who are the official local management authorities for this World Natural Heritage properties, have recently considered to partly open up camping and bonfire tours behind closed doors, leaving local residents completely in the dark about the plan. The core of the “Taketomi Town Iriomote Island Ecotourism Promotion Council” (referred to as “Iriomote Island Ecotourism Council,”) is made up of the deputy mayor of Taketomi Town, the manager of Taketomi Town Nature Tourism Division, who are each nominated to the chairman and the secretary general of the Council; Taketomi Town Nature Tourism Division acts as the secretariat of the Council; and the heads of the local office of Ministry of the Environment and the head of relevant divisions of Okinawa Prefecture are also involved as the members. In the meeting of this council, on January 29, 2024 the secretariat unveiled about consideration for camping and bonfire tours on the beach of Iriomote Island, and clarified that significant progress has been made towards opening up the business opportunity.¹³

3.2 Lack of consistency with the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan

According to the report by Taketomi Town, amongst the nine proposed sites for camping/bonfires, all of which locate inside public coasts, four sites including “Sabasaki”, “Amitori”, “Sakiyama” and “Kanokawa” are located inside the WH properties and the Class I Special Zone in Iriomote-Ishigaki National Park, and three sites including “Atuk West”, “Takara beach” and “Takana West” are located inside the buffer zone of WH properties and the Class II Special Zone in the National Park.

¹³ Document 1-3 “Back-country camping tours on the beach” that was circulated at the meeting held on the Taketomi Town Iriomote Island Ecotourism Promotion Council January 29, 2024

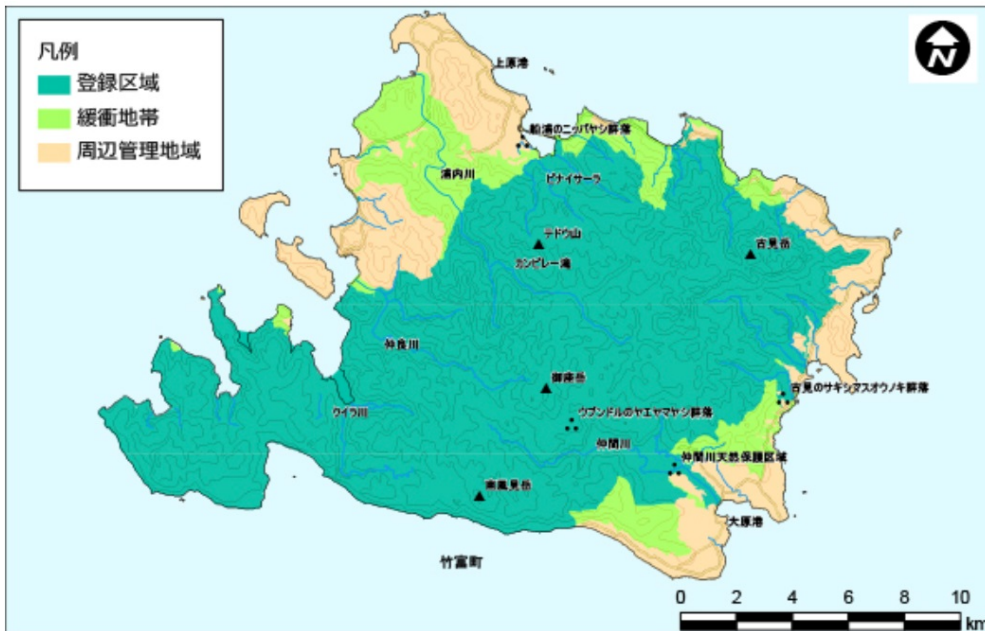
Figure 5



Proposed sites for camping/bonfire tours

Referred to the Document 1-3 “Back-country camping tours on the beach” (marked in red) that was circulated at the meeting held on the Taketomi Town Iriomote Island Ecotourism Promotion Council January 29, 2024

Figure 6



World Heritage properties, buffer zone and “Surrounding Conservation Areas”

Referred to the website of the Okinawa and Amami Regional Office for Nature Conservation, Ministry of Environment

<https://kyushu.env.go.jp/okinawa/amami-okinawa/heritage-area/index.html>

On the other hand, in the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan, the basic management policy is that “In the World Heritage properties, preservation of heritage value should be the top priority, and on the assumption that all activities will cause impacts, the impact of tourism should be kept below the current level” while the critical limit for that is defined “Tourism within the Heritage properties should be limited to the 20 locations that are regularly used for nature experience as of 2019.” However, none of the nine proposed camping and bonfire tour locations is included in the 20 locations. The ongoing plan for opening up a business opportunity for camping and bonfire tours is clearly inconsistent with the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan.

3.3 Review process lacking transparency and public participation

Regarding the plan promoting camping and bonfire tours, no briefing sessions have been held for residents or additional stakeholders. As a result, islanders who are not directly involved in the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Council, especially islanders who are not tourism operators, have not been able to participate in discussions.

3.4 Discussion

Camping and bonfires can cause forest fires, increase the impact on the natural environment due to collection, excretion, trampling, etc., and jeopardize not only campers but also island residents during the rescue activities in the event of an accident. For this reason, the ban on camping and bonfires that Taketomi Town has called for has already been established as a common understanding among the residents, and changing this without appropriate necessity and rationality would not only undermine the motivation of the residents to participate in the protection and management the WH properties, but also affects their compliance with the laws and rules, which are securing the value of WH properties. Furthermore, it must be noted that the plan for launching camping and bonfires tourism was proposed after the considerable part of Iriomote Island was designated as WH properties. This new plan cannot be justified without a very high degree of necessity and rationality.

However, looking at the review process to date, it seems clear that there is an intention to allow specific businesses to exploit the nature of Iriomote Island, which is branded as a World Natural Heritage, exclusively as a resource for tourism businesses, while there is no evidence that the project was motivated by concern for the conservation of nature or with any consideration of local residents.

Tourism companies in the island, which are calling for this business opportunity for camping and bonfire tourism, are not waiting for the conclusion of the discussion on the

public platform including the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Council and the Iriomote Island Sub-committee of the WH Regional Liaison Committee, and have actively been conducting such tours, even though presently camping and bonfires are prohibited in the Overall Concept.

From the above points, it is extremely difficult to accept the necessity and rationality of opening up the business opportunity for camping and bonfire tourism.

4 Recommendation

JTEF/Yamaneko Patrol recommends that IUCN make a recommendation to the World Heritage Committee requesting the State Party (Japan) to:

- a) Further revise the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan and review the critical limit on the number of tourists entering the area per day (1,200 people) and the upper limit on the annual number of them (330,000 people);
- b) Establish a specific system to keep the visitation at or below both the per-day limit and the per-year limit, which are referred to in paragraph a), with the premise of incorporating ferry boarding restrictions on the route connecting Iriomote Island and Ishigaki Island.
- c) Regarding the opening of business opportunities for camping and bonfire tourism, make not only the administrative organizations but also tourism operators seeking the opportunities be accountable to the island residents, and after thorough discussions with them, carefully consider the consistency off the idea with the Iriomote Island Tourism Management Plan.