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# **The First Impact Assessment of a Development Project on Ainu Culture**

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**Masami Iwasaki-Goodman, Ph.D.  
Hokkai Gakuen University  
Sapporo, Japan**

**Koichi Kaizawa,  
Ainu Culture Preservation Research Office  
Biratori, Japan**

## 1. Introduction

In Biratori, Hokkaido, Japan, a three-year research project began in April, 2003, to assess the impact of dam construction on the culture of the indigenous Ainu people. This presentation provides background information on the project, an over-view of the research and a summary of progress made in the first year of the project.

## 2. Background

In 1982, the Hokkaido Development Agency of the Government of Japan proposed the “Saru River Region Improvement Plan”. The plan includes construction of two dams<sup>1</sup>; the Nibutani dam on the Saru River and, further upstream, the Biratori Dam on the Nukabira river, a tributary of the Saru River. Construction of Nibutani Dam was completed in 1988. However, the social and political environment related to the “Saru River Region Improvement Plan” has changed over the years as a result of various important incidents. One of these is the Nibutani Court Case resulting from the conflict over expropriation of land. Also, revision of the River Act, which is the national legislation concerning the management of rivers, has had serious effects on the procedures related to local development projects involving rivers. The new River Act includes a requirement for community participation in planning and implementation of development projects. Because of this new requirement, the “Saru River Region Improvement Plan” of 1982 had to be reviewed. Between December of 1999 and April of 2001, the Basin Committee who is responsible for reviewing the plan, held 9 meetings. Community hearings and community meetings were also held in order to re-evaluate the river improvement plan. As a result, it was decided that the plan would be implemented and that construction of the Biratori Dam would begin in 2006.

The Hokkaido Development Agency states four principles as the goal of the “Saru River Region Improvement Plan”. Firstly, the plan aims to prevent or reduce the impact of natural disasters such as floods. Secondly, it ensures stable flow of river water, preservation of fauna and flora, and sufficient supply of water for fisheries and landscape as well as maintenance of water quality. The third purpose is to preserve the natural environment around the Saru River region, which allows preservation of local Ainu culture. Lastly, the plan aims to contribute to community development, which includes development of forestry, tourism based on forest resources, and the preservation of local culture. With these four principles as the ultimate goal the Biratori Dam is designed to serve multiple purposes: 1) to control floods in Biratori and Mombetsu towns, 2) to control and normalize the water flow, 3) to supply water

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<sup>1</sup> In the original plan, which was proposed in 1982, there were three dams to be constructed. However, the plan to construct one of them was eventually abolished. Construction of two dams, Nibutani Dam and Biratori Dam were kept in the plan.

to the houses and to irrigation in Biratori and Mombetsu towns, 4) to supply water for a hydro power station to provide electricity to households.

It is important to note that the current impact assessment project is one of the tangible outcomes of the “Nibutani Dam Case” that clarified the need for assessing the impact on Ainu culture prior to the initiation of development projects. For the construction of the Nibutani Dam, two Ainu landowners refused to acquiesce to the expropriation of land they owned. This led to a legal contest in the Sapporo District Court in the early 1980s. After many years of court-room trials, the Court handed down a decision in 1997, that declared the government’s actions in pursuing a development project illegal. The Court stated that the government should have considered whether the public interests, such as control of floods provided by the construction of Nibutani Dam should have priority over the Ainu people’s rights to enjoy their culture and that the government had failed to assess the effect that the construction of the Nibutani Dam would have on the local Ainu culture thereby ignoring values that required serious consideration. This decision is significant, in that it made it mandatory for the planner of development projects to assess the impact on local Ainu culture. Evidently, this applies to the construction of the Biratori Dam, and the Development Agency had to consider a way to assess the impact of the project on Ainu culture in the area.

There is one more important element that effected the planning of the impact assessment of Biratori Dam. Biratori Township has been implementing an area development plan for the purpose of promoting understanding and preserving local Ainu culture. As a part of the plan, the Biratori town has drafted the “Ioro Plan ( a plan to create an area where various aspects of Ainu culture will be revitalized and preserved)”. According to the plan, Biratori Town will select several locations along the Saru River region, and organize various activities in order to preserve Ainu cultural tradition and to promote understanding of the Ainu culture among the local people. Ultimately, Biratori town aims to create a community where peoples with different cultural background live together in harmony. Because construction of the Biratori Dam will affect implementation of this plan, the impact assessment in relation to the “Ioro Plan” was also incorporated into the over all assessment work.

It is important to note that there are recent significant changes in the social and political environment in terms of the aboriginal issues in Japan. In 1997, “The Law Concerning Promotion of Ainu culture and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge about Ainu Traditions” was enacted. The new law replaced the former “Aboriginal Protection Law” that had been in effect for about one hundred years, and which served as the legal bases for assimilating the Ainu people into the main stream society. In the new law, the government of Japan stated its intention to support the Ainu people to preserve their cultural tradition and to create the kind of society where they can maintain

their pride as an ethnic group. The new law, inevitably, accelerated the revitalization movement of Ainu culture which had been carried out quietly during the 1980s. Currently, various branches of the Hokkaido Association of Ainu have been actively conducting Ainu culture promotion programs.

### 3. Beginning of the Ainu culture preservation research in the Saru River region

On May 12, 2003, Biratori Town established the "Committee for the Ainu Culture Preservation Research", which includes local Ainu elders, government officials and experts of related areas such as law, landscaping and anthropology. The Committee was set up to supervise the Ainu culture preservation research and to make recommendations to the mayor of Biratori Town. The committee is composed of 15 permanent members, and will invite advisors as needed.

Besides the Committee for the Ainu Culture Preservation Research, the Ainu Culture Preservation Research Office (ACPRO) was set up and four groups were established to conduct various tasks in the office. They are a group in charge of field work, a group in charge of data compilation, a group that is building a model and conducts computer simulations, and a group in charge of general affairs. Local people were hired on a full-time base to take up these jobs. Among those who applied for the jobs, 15 people were selected for their understanding of Ainu culture and their interest. About half of the workers are of Ainu descent.

In addition to the Committee, and the research groups, a series of lectures on a variety of topics that are related to Ainu culture preservation and impact assessment are given at "Ioro Culture University". These lectures are open to the community people, and provide a way to inform the local people of the research outcomes.

In 2003 when the three-year research began, the over-all research schedule was drafted by the general affair section. According to the schedule, the first year is set aside for preparation and training of research staff, with limited work of filing data, simulation, and fieldwork. The main research will be conducted in the year 2004, with a focus on structured fieldwork, data filing and analysis, and simulation trials. Also, they aim to consider mitigation measures and testing of these measures. The final year, the year 2005, will be spent to finalize research activities, consider details concerning mitigation and finalize the over-all research project.

The Ainu Cultural Preservation Research had numerous unique features. Firstly, this is the one of the few cases of social impact assessment that has been conducted in Japan. Moreover, it is the very first case that has a focus on the impact on aboriginal culture. Secondly, this research was planned and conducted with full participation of the community people, which is the first

such attempt in Japan. As mentioned earlier, some members of the committee are the local Ainu, and all of the fieldworkers are local residents, allowing the impact assessment to be done from the view of the local people. Most past research was conducted by experts who were outsiders. In the past, Biratori attracted many researchers who came from outside of the community, and the local people were the informants. There were clear divisions between those who conducted the research and those who were the subjects of the research. In the Ainu Culture Preservation Research, the research structure has been changed. It is significant that a new relationship of the researchers and the researched is realized in this research, and those who inherit the Ainu culture are the ones who engaged in the research activities.

Besides the Ainu Culture Preservation Research, the Development Agency has been conducting 5 other projects in preparation for Biratori Dam including: organization of the committee that is in charge of conducting an environmental impact assessment in April of 2003, research to examine soil quality and dynamics of land slides, land surveys for compensation, examination of sand for making concrete and, archaeological excavations to examine ancient remains.

#### 4. Research Method

Meetings of the Ainu Culture Preservation Committee has been held once every two months. The first committee meeting was held on May 24, 2003. The meeting was open to the public, and the local people, officials of the related organizations. Media persons attended the meeting as observers. For the first committee meeting, Dr.Komei Sasaki who is an expert in Ainu culture and has been involved in government policy making on Ainu issues, was present as an advisor. In the afternoon, after the committee meeting ended, the first “Ioro Culture University” was held, with Dr.Sakaski as a lecturer. He talked about the principles of the government plan, called “Ioro Plan” to establish the area where Ainu cultural tradition is re-constructed and preserved. It is noteworthy that he referred to the government project as creating “the Ainu land”. After Dr.Sasaki’s lecture. Dr. Tsujii, chair of the Ainu Culture Preservation Committee, talked about local vegetation in relation to the “Ioro Plan”.

The second committee meeting was held in the community closest to the construction site of Biratori Dam. The committee members were shown the area and deepened their understanding of the development project. In the later committee meetings, progress of the research activities was reported by ACPRO, and the committee members asked questions and gave advice and suggestions. The committee meetings serve as a forum where committee members formally interact with fieldworkers. Furthermore, “Ioro Culture University” provides a forum where experts in various areas share their expertise, educating the fieldworkers with specialized knowledge and skills. In “Ioro culture University”, one of the committee members gave a lecture on

landscaping the city utilizing cultural heritage sites using an Italian case as an example. Other committee member talked about the experience of Canadian Aboriginal people relating to social impact assessment, and further explained the methodology commonly used in such research. Through lectures, committee members provide advice and tips to the fieldworkers on how to conducts research effectively.

Besides formally giving advice to the fieldworkers in the committee meetings and “the Ioro Culture University”, the member of the committee actually work with them in the field. Since some of the committee members are Ainu elders, the field workers interview them, asking about their childhood, their memories of the dam site, and Ainu culture in general. Also, the committee members whose expertise is cultural anthropology, work with the fieldworkers, giving advice on research methods and explaining similar cases of impact assessment that have been conducted in other countries. The “Guidelines and Principles For Social Impact Assessment” put together by The Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment in 1994 is used as the basis for the research method. This includes the following

10 steps:

- 1 ) participation of the local people
- 2 ) alternatives
- 3 ) baseline
- 4 ) scoping
- 5 ) collecting data
- 6 ) counter-measures
- 7 ) further impacts
- 8 ) further alternatives
- 9 ) mitigation
- 10 ) monitoring

Similarly, the committee member whose specialty is landscaping, assisted the group by introducing common landscaping methods. It is indispensable to have committee members to provide their expertise to the fieldworkers in order that the community-base research with participation of local people will be conducted in a manner that meets rigorous standards. Besides the assistance from the committee members, the fieldworkers invite experts of various areas and hold training sessions to enhance their knowledge needed for successful research, For example, they held a study session regarding ecological dynamics of rivers. They also participated in various fieldwork where they learned to distinguish various wild birds and trees. Experts on bears were also invited to talk to the fieldworkers. Through these opportunities, the fieldworkers have gained specialized knowledge and prepared themselves for the main research that is to begin in 2004.

## 5. Result of the research in the year 2003

The Ainu Culture Preservation Research began in May, 2003 and has been making progress in the following tasks.

- 1 ) Identify what they will lose when the Biratori Dam is completed.  
Field workers have selected 18 sites, mainly in the area where the Biraotri Dam is to be constructed, and have begun identifying available wild plants.
- 2 ) Study Ainu culture through harvesting and cooking traditionally used resources.  
Field workers have been harvesting plants and shells, and process them according to the information that they gained through interviewing the elders.
- 3 ) Study Ainu culture through interviewing elders.  
Field workers began interviewing elders who are familiar with Ainu traditional way of life.
- 4 ) Scoping by listing topics that need to be examined.  
Field workers discussed possible effects of the Biratori Dam and made them into a list.
- 5 ) Held a workshop to practice effective interviews, and also discussed developing a code of fieldwork ethics.  
With the assistance of an anthropologist who provided them with examples of various fieldwork ethics used in similar research done overseas, field workers drafted their own code of fieldwork ethics.
- 6 ) Filing data  
The data filing group has been responsible for transcribing tapes of various interviews, filing data on plant identification, and filing archives concerning Ainu culture.
- 7 ) Making model of Biratori Dam and the surrounding area  
The simulation group has completed a model of the area including Biraori Dam and its vicinity.

In November 2003, a representative of ACPRO reported several important points that had become evident as a result of their research until that point.

- 1) According to two sources of archival material, it is evident that the area where Biratori Dam is going to be built used to be "Ioro (the area where peoples gathered what they need for their everyday life)"

- 2) The area called Sukushipetsu had abundant wild plants used for food.
- 3) The area around Nukapira River had abundant fish and animals used for food.
- 4) According to the interviews with elders, it became clear that in the area where Biratori Dam is to be built there used to be Chinomishiri, the place where people pray.
- 5) 50 years ago, the area around Nukapira River was surrounded with un-logged forests.
- 6) The upper stream of Nukapira River had abundant elm (bark of elm is used for making traditional robes).
- 7) The area is rich in fossels and gold.
- 8) The Biratori Dam construction site has total of 15 archeological sites, two more than previously known.
- 9) Green stratified rocks found in remains in Nukapira River are also found in the Honshu regions. Further examination on the relationship between them is required.

Furthermore, it became evident that Ainu culture should be viewed in relationship with their important resources such as salmon and bear. When the area around Nikapira River is flooded under the dam and bears no longer live there, is it possible for the Ainu cultural tradition which depends heavily on the power of bear to survive?

ACPRO has selected the following research topics that are thought to be important for assessing the effect of Biratori Dam.

- 1) gather basic information (statistical data, history, etc.)
- 2) learn more about the details of Biraotri Dam
- 3) examine local peoples' feelings toward the places related to oral history, ancient remains, and historical remains and the changes that will be seen in them.
- 4) Learn more about animal and plant resources that have a close connection with Ainu culture, their oral history and their use.
- 5) Examine animal and plant resources that will be affected by the construction of Biraotri Dam and their value in the Ainu culture
- 6) Examine effects of the Nibutani Dam
- 7) Examine other cases
- 8) Predict the effects of Biratori Dam on animal, plants, people and the Ainu



- culture, based on the data gathered from other cases such as Nibutani Dam
- 9) Identify the losses that can be reconstructed and the losses that can not, and consider mitigating measures
  - 10) Examine the effects of Biratori Dam on “Ioro Plan”

#### 6. Typhoon No.10 that hit Biratori in August, 2003

On August 10, about three months after ACPRO began their work, a powerful Typhoon No.10, hit the Hidaka district, including Biratori Town. The typhoon brought heavy rain and caused a major flood in the Saru River region. Damage was overwhelming with land slides and destruction of numerous houses, killing six people. The typhoon also seriously affected the research activities that had been in progress. Some of the research sites that were marked with poles were destroyed, and land slides in various areas limited access to research sites. ACPRO is therefore currently asking the Development Agency to extend the duration of the research.

#### 7. Conclusion

The first impact assessment of a development project, namely Biratori Dam in Biratori, Japan, on Ainu culture began in 2002. There have been significant changes affecting Ainu people in recent years, which have set the stage for implementation of the current assessment. The Ainu Cultural Preservation Research has unique characteristics, in that the focus of the research is to assess the impact on the culture of the indigenous people. Furthermore, the main part of the fieldwork is carried out by the local people, with the assistance of the experts in various fields. Having completed the preliminary work in the first year of the three-year research plan, ACPRO will be conducting the main part of the field work and data filing/analysis in the year 2004.