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**Japan's First Hope Spot Honors Rare Coral Reefs and Dugong Habitats**

(HENOKO-ŌURA, JAPAN) – October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

The coastal waters of Henoko-Ōura in Japan are an understated natural wonder. The tiny islands within these waters mark the northernmost point on Earth for blue coral (*Heliopora coerulea*) growth, where lucky divers can spot rare creatures including the largest known colony of blue coral in the world (*Heliopora coerulea*). This unique coral hot-spot powers a little-known but richly diverse marine ecosystem which holds more than 5,000 species in its waters including 262 known to be endangered. Several new and previously unrecorded species have been recently found, and scientists believe there could be more yet to be discovered.

It's on Okinawa that the United States government has maintained military bases since WWII, and now has its sights set on the waters of Henoko-Ōura Bay, also on the island. Unfortunately, the beginning stages of moving the U.S. military airfield base is already under way. The process has been extensive: seabed drilling (surveys in preparation for the main landfill operation) has been conducted since August of 2014, and actual construction began in April of 2017. In December 2018, the landfill began.

Mission Blue is proud to declare the Henoko-Ōura Coastal Waters the very first Hope Spot in Japan in recognition of the area's significant biodiversity, its rare coral populations and the fight to keep these waters and the life within it protected from the establishment of the U.S. military base and future development through actionable conservation efforts.

Dr. Sylvia Earle, Founder of Mission Blue, states, “There’s thousands of species in the Henoko-Ōura Coastal Waters, including the famous blue coral and dugongs (*Dugong dugon*). It’s important that people use their voices to question the need for the new construction that’s on the horizon, as compared to the importance of protecting a place that can’t be recovered once it’s gone. I congratulate the Champions who are bringing attention to the importance of this area. If the Henoko-Ōura Coastal Waters can be maintained and protected, it would be such a gift to not only the people of Japan, but of the entire world.”

Mariko Abe, Hope Spot Champion, elaborates on her goals for the Hope Spot. “We want this Hope Spot to be a pole for conservation, sustainable tourism and education. We hope to pass on these values to subsequent generations.”

The Henoko-Ōura Coastal Waters Hope Spot encompasses 44.5 square kilometers and is located along Okinawa Island, Okinawa prefecture, Japan, including Cape Henoko and the islands of Abuōrujima, Nagashima and Hirashima. The islands of the Ryukyu Archipelago in the Henoko-Ōura waters are situated at the world’s northern limit for corals.

Surveys have discovered two previously unrecorded species of sea cucumber (*Holothuroidea*), and a variety of (unlisted and newly discovered) species of sponges (*Porifera*), ctenophores, sea slugs (*Nudibranchia*), and crabs (*C. pagurus*). Many of these unlisted species have only recently been recorded here (11 of them have been discovered since 2007), so it is likely that the biodiversity of the area is even higher than has so far been recognized. The seagrass beds to the south of Camp Schwab at Henoko total an area of 173ha, the largest around Okinawa Island. All of the seven species of seagrass identified there (NACS-J 2008, 2012), are Red-listed by the Ministry of the Environment as Near Threatened. Besides providing food for dugongs and turtles, these seagrasses are known to be a vital habitat for larval stages of numerous other species.

From the point of view of biodiversity, this marine area is already recognized as one of Japan’s finest; the Okinawa prefectural government has designated it as Rank 1 in its policy for nature conservation, which demands the highest degree of conservation effort, while the Ministry of Environment also selected Ōura river and the mangrove forests in the river mouth as one of the candidate sites for a Ramsar Site in September of 2010.

Japan’s Ministry of the Environment selected this place as one of its Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas Identified by Japan. However, the Japanese government has no intention of making these designated marine areas into nature reserves. The Henoko-Ōura coastal waters is a prime example of this, as it is currently being landfilled.

“We believe this new Hope Spot will establish the Henoko-Ōura Coastal Waters as a regional center for understanding and will promote the relationship among the environment, peace, and human rights,” Abe says.

Protecting the Henoko-Ōura coastal waters from further development of the U.S. military base and educating the public about this monumental blue pocket of the planet will benefit Japan and all of mankind for generations to come. We cannot replace what is lost– the time is now to recognize and move to protect the world’s natural wonders for their crucial role in shaping life on Earth as we know it.

### About Mission Blue

Led by legendary oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle, Mission Blue is uniting a global coalition to inspire an upwelling of public awareness, access and support for a worldwide network of marine protected areas – Hope Spots. Under Dr. Earle’s leadership, the Mission Blue team implements communications campaigns that elevate Hope Spots to the world stage through documentaries, social media, traditional media and innovative tools like Google Earth. Mission Blue embarks on regular oceanic expeditions that shed light on these vital ecosystems and build support for their protection. Mission Blue also supports the work of conservation NGOs around the world that share the mission of building public support for ocean protection. The Mission Blue alliance includes more than 200 respected ocean conservation groups and like-minded organizations.

### About The Nature Conservation Society of Japan (NACS-J)

The Nature Conservation Society of Japan (NACS-J), established in 1951, is one of largest nature conservation NGOs in Japan and has been supported by 25,000 supporters across Japan. NACS-J promotes conservation of endangered species and their habitat, building sustainable community by making the most of nature and expanding opportunities for people to become part of nature, and-guardians of nature.

The work of NACS-J is based on sound science and through comprehensive conservation measures including advocacy, research, partnership, outreach, environment education and actions on the ground in order to support our motto “Making A New Path For Tomorrow, With The Power of Nature”.

### Organizations Involved:

The Nature Conservation Society of Japan  
Dugong no Sato  
Association to Protect the Northernmost Dugong  
Dugong Network Okinawa

“No Heliport Base” Association of 10 Districts North of Futamai Society of No Base in  
Oura Bay/Residents of Villages North of Futami  
The Conference Opposing Heliport Construction  
Diving Team Rainbow-The Conference Opposing Heliport Construction  
Association for Protection of Marine Communities (AMCo)  
Save the Dugong Campaign Center (SDCC)  
Okinawa Environmental Network  
Ramsar Network Japan