




# Construction at Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site suspended

By MASATOSHI NARAYAMA/ Staff Writer  
June 21, 2024 at 07:00 JST

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Construction is planned for a base station for wireless networks near Cape Shiretoko, the heart of the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site in Hokkaido, raising concerns about possible damage to the environment. (Asahi Shimbun file photo)



SHARI, Hokkaido--A contentious construction project at a UNESCO-listed natural site here has hit a last-minute stumbling block as conservation groups demand an environmental impact assessment.

The project would construct a base station for wireless networks near Cape Shiretoko, the heart of the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site, to which entry has long been restricted to protect the pristine environment.

The construction of a solar farm and other related facilities to power the base station was expected to begin in May and continue through October.

However, it is now unclear when the 900-million-yen (\$5.8 million) project will begin.

Local officials and conservation groups both within and outside of Hokkaido have demanded the project's suspension, arguing that the current plan could do irreparable damage to the environment.

The planned construction would use 26,000 square meters of land near the cape, including roughly 7,000 square meters, the equivalent of a soccer field, on which 264 solar panels would be installed.

Precautions to protect the landscape would include hiding the solar panels behind 3-meter-high fences colored to blend in with the surroundings. The facilities would also be connected with underground optic cables and power grids that, in theory, would not harm the scenery.

Building the facilities, however, would entail transporting construction materials through the peninsula's rugged terrain, meaning damage to the environment could be unavoidable.

Issuing a statement earlier this month, the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage Site Scientific Council, which is made up of experts and scientists, called on the Environment Ministry and Hokkaido's local governments to put a hold on the project and carefully assess the potential impact on the area's rare animals and plants.

The council pointed out the project's implications for the "outstanding universal value" of the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site, which was registered in 2005.

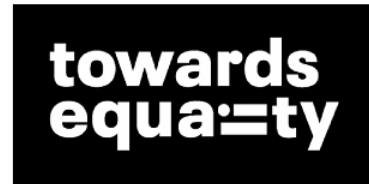
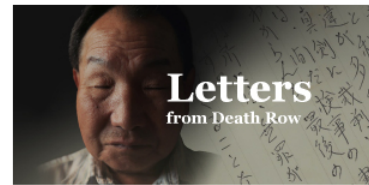
The protection of Shiretoko Peninsula was recognized as essential to sustain globally dwindling populations of Blakiston's fish owls, Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles,

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which all depend on the area as their breeding grounds or wintering sites.

The white-tailed eagle, which has been designated by the central government as a national monument, is classified as a vulnerable species on the Environment Ministry's Red List.

A pair of white-tailed eagles use a forest near the cape as a breeding site, according to conservationists.

The Nature Conservation Society of Japan and the Hokkaido Nature Conservation Society have also issued a similar statement.

The latter questioned why the ministry approved what it considers a "large-scale project" in the vicinity of the cape in the first place.

"It is not just a special protected zone, but the heart of the untouched region of the Shiretoko Peninsula," said another conservationist. "Under normal circumstances, obtaining a permit for the construction of even a small-scale structure would have been impossible."

The ministry's guidelines for managing the Shiretoko National Park state that a permit will not be granted to build a large solar farm in the cape area.

However, the ministry approved the project at the site as a special case in late March, saying its perceived public interest outweighed the restrictions on construction projects.

The group also asked the ministry about how possible fires at the planned solar farm would be extinguished, since access to the area has been restricted, making it difficult for emergency services to respond.

The cape area becomes inaccessible from the sea in winter due to drift ice.

### CALLS FROM THE CAPE

The planned base station near the cape is one of four sites on the Shiretoko Peninsula where four major carriers--NTT Docomo Inc., KDDI Corp., Softbank Corp. and Rakuten Mobile Inc.--intend to build base stations.

These new facilities were intended to make mobile connections available throughout the peninsula starting next year.

Of the project's 900-million-yen price tag, about 440 million yen were funded by central government subsidies.

The telecommunications ministry has spearheaded efforts to provide more reliable phone services to the area after a sightseeing boat capsized in a storm off the peninsula two years ago--leaving all 24 passengers and two crew members dead or missing.

The captain of the Kazu I was unable to immediately alert the Japan Coast Guard to the emergency because his mobile phone, served by KDDI, could not get reception in the area.

The telecommunications ministry's Land Mobile Communication Division said the primary purpose of the construction project is to "promote tourism," particularly boating excursions, which are the only way for tourists to view the cape.

"Although the transport ministry has jurisdiction over safeguarding vessels, crew members will feel reassured if they can use mobile phones as an extra means of communication," a ministry official said.

Shari, the town in which Cape Shiretoko is located, greenlit the project, noting the benefit of improved wireless connections and the central government's pledge not to impact the environment.

"We have been hoping for infrastructure that will make it easier for local fishermen at work in the sea to communicate with their relatives," a town official said. "In addition, the central government promised to minimize the harm to the environment and scenery."

But as more details of the project emerged, Hiroaki Yamauchi, Shari's mayor, acknowledged that Shiretoko's nature and landscape are being threatened by the plan. He called for a review of the project, including scaling back its scope.

Even if the base stations were constructed as planned, the transport ministry's Hokkaido District Transport Bureau said it could not necessarily guarantee fail-proof connections.

"Even when users are within the service area, numerous craggy coves on the peninsula could cause the service to shut down temporarily," a bureau official warned.

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