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Building a Holistic and Participatory Approach to Ainu Heritage Ecosystem: Lessons and Challenges from Ecomuseum Planning in Biratori Town, Japan

Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines how an ecomuseum approach mediates diverse heritage elements to foster an Ainu heritage ecosystem that aligns with Ainu worldviews, specifically *iwor* (hunting grounds in the Ainu language). Furthermore, it explores the potentials and tensions of the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project in Biratori, Japan, which adopts a participatory ecomuseum approach challenging the historical disenfranchisement of Ainu stewardship within heritage management.

Design/Methodology: The study employs a case analysis of the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project, aimed at integrating culture and nature, and tangible and intangible heritage, grounded in *iwor*, across the Saru River Basin. Methodologically, the study draws on ethnographic observations and participatory planning records from the Biratori community in 2023 and 2024, as well as scholarship on ecomuseum, heritage ecosystem and Indigenous heritage discourse, to evaluate how the ecomuseum approach can be mobilised in practice.

Findings: The ecomuseum planning phase advances dialogical interactions among

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multiple actors in Ainu heritage, which are operationalised in the practice of cultural revitalization and biodiversity conservation in mutually reinforcing ways. However, systemic barriers rooted in settler-colonial legacies and entrenched heritage management practices risk reducing Ainu agency to mere culturalization. For future improvement, the project aims to transition towards co-management, shared decision-making, and the coevolution of knowledge about heritage with external stakeholders.

Originality: This study presents Japan's first framework mediating Ainu worldviews and heritage management, aligned with the heritage ecosystem concept. By reframing *iwor* as a living relational system, it reasserts Ainu agency to reclaim stewardship within state frameworks and contributes to decolonial discourse.

1. Introduction

As with many forms of Indigenous heritage, the heritage of the Ainu people, who have long lived in the northern part of Japan's archipelago, especially Hokkaido, is inherently holistic, encompassing the cultural and natural, tangible and intangible, as well as human and more-than-human elements. One concept that captures this interconnectedness is *iwor*, which has been broadly translated as hunting grounds (Okuda, 2022), though it has more complex meaning dependent on local context (Izumi, 1952). However, the holistic

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elements of *iwor* were profoundly disrupted by colonization, a process known as kaitaku (development in Japanese). Hokkaido, part of the traditional homeland of the Ainu, underwent systematic "development" from 1869 at the outset of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), during the emergence of the modern Japanese nation-state. This "development" is structured by national defence and industrial developments enacted through the large-scale immigration of wajin (ethnic Japanese people). Kaitaku was also advanced through assimilationist policies that restricted Ainu customs, subsistence practices, and land stewardship, thereby fundamentally altering Ainu relationships with natural environment.

In contemporary Japan, the management of cultural property upholds these colonial legacies by failing to recognize the interconnected cultural and natural dimensions of Ainu heritage. Substantive policy shifts emerged in the 21st century, including the official recognition of the Ainu as Indigenous people in 2008, the enactment of the Ainu Policy Promotion Act in 2019, and the establishment of the National Ainu Museum and Park in 2020. While these reforms have begun to acknowledge the need for holistic conservation approaches (Okada, 2026a), subsequent efforts have yet to be implemented broadly across Hokkaido. Furthermore, this issue is exacerbated by the lack of dedicated legislation to ensure the engagement of the Ainu in the governance of their heritage (ibid).

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Previous studies have examined Ainu heritage primarily through the lenses of Indigenous archaeology, Indigenous rights, cultural revitalization, and tourism development. They highlight how Ainu heritage is often mediated through wajin-centred frameworks of recognition, research, and public use. They stress the need for Ainu engagement across all stages of heritage work (e.g., Kato, 2017; Nakamura, 2008, 2013; Okada, 2025, 2026a). However, this body of literature does not address the practical and theoretical frameworks that can mediate between Ainu worldviews and heritage management in Japan.

This study examines the ongoing *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project in Biratori Town, southwestern Hokkaido (Fig. 1). Biratori serves a focal point for Ainu-led heritage action. Compared to other regions, the town has a relatively large number of Ainu residents, many of whom openly practices Ainu culture as a part of their daily lives. Furthermore, recent local environmental initiatives have paved the way for Ainu engagement at a municipal level. In particular, the 2001 Biratori Town Ainu policy proposal that align with ecomuseum functions, such as in-situ heritage conservation, networking of heritage sites, and Ainu-centred learning (Biratori Town Promotion Council for the Ainu People's Cultural Park Concept, 2001). By mobilising this framework, the project aims to integrate decades of Ainu-led heritage efforts,

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empowering local Ainu communities as curators of their living heritage.

Figure 1. Map of Biratori Town

Source: Adapted from Biratori Town, (2006), P.3, Figure 1.

This study is grounded in a qualitative record generated by the ongoing planning process of the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project. It draws on participant observation of revitalisation activities, institutional reports, and discussions and workshops conducted with the ecomuseum working group between 2023-2024. This working group includes members from the Biratori Ainu Association, the Biratori Town Public Corporation for Ainu Culture Promotion, and municipal officials from the divisions of Ainu policy, museum, and tourism (CATS, Hokkaido University, 2023, 2024). Building on long-term engagement with the local Ainu community and experience as a facilitator and external advisor, I analyse these materials through a reflexive, community-oriented lens. In this study, "community" encompasses both residents of Ainu and non-Ainu, while "Ainu-led" refers to governance structures in which the Ainu exercise agency in decision-making and heritage practice. Therefore, this study focuses on design choices, participatory governance, and the emerging dynamics among both stakeholders and their sociocultural

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perspectives.

To do so, this study first situates recent shifts in Japan's heritage governance within global heritage discourses shaped by decolonial approaches. These developments are also connected to the Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems (hereafter, the Gunma Declaration; Gunma Prefecture and Japan ICOMOS, 2025). It examines the ecomuseum's role in interconnecting diverse heritage elements to foster a holistic approach to Ainu heritage and the local ecosystem. It then introduces the project, exploring how the ecomuseum intends to integrate heritage ecosystem and *iwor* frameworks into a shared planning process to challenge established heritage management practices and the ongoing disenfranchisement of Ainu stewardship. Finally, it evaluates the core schemes, identifies key strengths and tensions, and outlines considerations for future practice.

2. The Background of Heritage Ecosystem Framework

The *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project is based upon the global ecomuseum movement, which provides a vocabulary and a planning logic for treating heritage as a living, place-based system organised through local community participation. Ecomuseum approach shifts focus from object-centred, building-based model towards territory-based model

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where heritage is understood as a process mobilised by communities across everyday places and activities to enhance local well-being (de Varine, 1996; Davis, 2009). As Maggi (2002) succinctly puts it, an ecomuseum is a "museum without walls" that conserves natural and cultural heritage through collaborative and sustainable practices. Moreover, as a flexible model that brings together research, conservation, and education, it empowers residents to serve as curators of heritage and enhances multiple forms of their engagements (Rivière, 1985).

This relational logic aligns with a broader set of interventions in heritage theory and policy that have increasingly contested the nature–culture binary and reoriented governance toward landscapes, relationships, and systems of care. In response to dominant Western binaries towards culture and nature, scholarship and Indigenous-led critiques have increasingly argued for approaches that foreground how significance is generated and sustained through ongoing relations among humans, other-than-human beings, and place, rather than through discrete objects or bounded sites (Lowenthal, 2005; van Londen *et al.*, 2019). Drawing on work with Indigenous Australians, Harrison articulates this shift by reconceptualizing heritage as a dialogical process of care in which human and non-human actors are entangled (Harrison, 2013, 2015).

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These relational approaches provide a conceptual basis for understanding Indigenous heritage not as an added category within existing regimes, but as a different account of what heritage is and how it is sustained through relationships. Nicholas (2022) defines Indigenous heritage as an interwoven set of relationships among people, places, objects, life forces, and knowledge, underscoring the inseparability of tangible and intangible dimensions and the centrality of stewardship grounded in those ties. Related policy developments increasingly echo this direction by shifting attention from isolated sites to "heritage place" and by making more visible the roles of Indigenous peoples, local communities, and other rights-holders who maintain reciprocal relationships with heritage (Ishizawa and Jo, 2024).

In parallel, the recognition of cultural landscapes, intangible heritage, and biodiversity governance has broadened the scope of heritage, reaffirming that Indigenous heritage extends beyond material culture to include language, landscapes, spiritual belief systems, ecological knowledge, and intergenerational practices of transmission. Indigenous stewardship is exercised across multiple governance arenas, such as at the World Heritage sites like Pimachiowin Aki, Canada (Rabliauskas, 2020), and Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, Australia (Smith *et al.*, 2019), national parks and other protected areas (e.g. , Mason *et al.*, 2022, 2024; Ross *et al*, 2009; Thomlinson & Crouch, 2012),

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and throughout Indigenous peoples' territories and related areas (e.g., Kelly *et al.*, 2024; Stó:lō Nation Lalems ye Stó:lō Si:ya:m, 2003).

These shifts toward relational, place-based heritage governance provide a useful lens for examining Japan, where modern heritage administration has long been shaped by categorical distinctions that can reproduce the nature–culture divide in practice. Since the enactment of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties in 1950, Japan has maintained an administrative framework that classifies cultural properties into distinct categories, primarily tangible, intangible, folk cultural properties, monuments, and groups of traditional buildings (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2022). In recent years, these foundational types have been implemented more comprehensively, as evidenced by the introduction of cultural landscapes in 2004 and the designation of *Pirka Noka*, 10 places of scenic beauty featured by Ainu oral traditions, in 2009. However, such integrated recognitions are still limited. Much of Ainu heritage, which has been transmitted through generations via oral traditions and place-based practices, is fragmented by nature–culture and tangible–intangible binaries. Consequently, its value is often assessed statically, which hinders the development of comprehensive management practices by local communities and impedes the local transmission of traditional knowledge.

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Within these constraints, Ainu heritage in Japan remains a site of contestation, specifically regarding the authority to define and manage it. Recognition has evolved from the Meiji era suppression to contemporary cultural revitalisation and promotion since the Ainu Culture Promotion Act of 1997, yet the national framework still lacks a dedicated category for Indigenous heritage (Okada, 2026a). Such a framework sustains ongoing struggles over stewardship across a wide range of Ainu heritage, such as the repatriation of ancestral remains (Okada, 2020) and the protection of intellectual property (Okada, 2026b).

In 2025, as a potential landmark to address these challenges, a new approach has begun to reshape heritage governance, treating cultural and natural dimensions as interrelated and foregrounding collaboration across sectors and stakeholders. Developed by the Guma Prefecture, Japan ICOMOS and participants at the 10th Anniversary International Symposium of Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites, the Gunma Declaration adopts the heritage ecosystem framework to address contemporary complexities by integrating critical perspectives on authenticity, Outstanding Universal Value, and the convergence of tangible and intangible heritage.

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3. Conceptualizing the Interconnectedness of Nature and Culture in Ainu Worldviews

Current heritage management in Japan does not fully account for the relational ontology articulated in Ainu worldviews, in which humans, more-than-human beings, and places are bound together through ongoing exchange. This interconnectedness is expressed through spiritual beliefs, ritual practices, and oral traditions. Ainu spiritual beliefs regard more-than-human elements such as animals, plants, and other natural beings as *kamuy* (divine beings) imbued with spiritual essence. Rather than utilitarian resources, *kamuy* maintain reciprocal relationships with humans through rituals and daily practice. The Ainu express their gratitude and respect for them through rituals conducted within *kotan* (a village community in the Ainu language) and at subsistence sites, so that the *kamuy* will return to the world of the Ainu to provide abundant vital resources (Biratori Town, 2006).

Such relational understandings are spatially situated, embedding spiritual belief and subsistence practices within specific landscapes that structure everyday practice and collective memory. For the Ainu community in Biratori, the sacred peak *Porosir* (also known as Mount Poroshiri) towers over the source of the Saru River (Fig. 1). This river provides the Ainu with abundant natural resources, and the mountain is seen as a place

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where the *kamuy* gathered. The local Ainu have revered and respected *Porosir* and considered climbing it taboo. These views have been passed down through generations as a part of the oral tradition (Kayano and Selden, 2012; Yoshihara and Inoue, 2018).

Within this worldview, *iwor* is more than a hunting ground; it denotes a dynamic cultural landscape sustained through reciprocal relationships among humans, natural environment, and more-than-human beings. In the Hidaka region of Hokkaido, the *iwor* is understood as a single unit, demarcated by the watershed, the mountain ridges on either side of the river, and the seashore at the estuary. Each *kotan* historically maintained its own *iwor*, which functioned not only as a site of resource extraction but also as a space of spiritual engagement, cultural memory, and environmental stewardship. In this sense, *iwor* is also a lived territory that anchors collective identity through relational practices (Izumi, 1952).

Along the Saru River Basin in Biratori, Ainu communities have obtained raw materials for everyday life, subsistence, and ritual implements from *iwor* over generations (Fig. 2). These practices generated a highly localized, embodied knowledge system, encompassing ecological cycles, seasonal rhythms, terrain-specific gathering techniques, and ethical protocols for use. Such knowledge has been transmitted intergenerationally through oral traditions, place names, prayer sites, myths, and ritual performance.

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Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of Ainu Heritage embedded in *Iwor*

Source: Biratori Town, (2006), P.18, Figure 4.

As documented in cultural impact assessments for the Biratori Dam construction (Biratori Town, 2006), local Ainu heritage is inseparable from the land and remains deeply place-based. Contemporary studies further emphasize how *iwor*-related ecological knowledge has traditionally been transmitted through embodied, place-based learning, often during shared activities, such as plant gathering, hunting, and riverside harvesting in *iwor* (Gayman, 2020; Kayano, 1994). These activities foster not only practical knowledge but also a cosmological understanding of the world rooted in ethical relationships with place and beings.

However, since the outset of colonial efforts in Hokkaido, wajin settlers have not acknowledged Ainu land, including *iwor*, reframing it as *terra nullius* and incorporating it into national property. These lands were subsequently granted to wajin settlers as part of kaitaku. Ainu communities commonly experienced forced relocation, erosion of customary subsistence practices, and cultural assimilation through the suppression of language, rituals, and traditional hunting (Siddle, 1997).

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In recent years, the Japanese government has expanded Ainu policy initiatives, yet these efforts still tend to undermine *iwor* and the worldviews it reflects by narrowing Ainu heritage to static and traditional culture. Although the Ainu Policy Promotion Act of 2019 provides a definition of Ainu culture, it does not explicitly mention collective stewardship. Consequently, it has not yet resulted in legislative support for sustaining socioecological relationships central to *iwor*. Nor does Japan's heritage system provide clear practices for Ainu engagement in the identification, designation, and protection of their heritage (Okada and Gomes, 2024). As a result, these dynamics reproduce the legacy of dispossession, constraining Ainu authority to define and steward heritage on their own terms and weakening the conditions that sustain *iwor* in practice (Okada, 2025, 2026b).

4. Community-Driven Ecomuseum Planning in Biratori Town

The *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project, a community-driven ecomuseum planning, builds upon decades of Ainu-led heritage initiatives in Biratori Town, Hokkaido. It is positioned as a practical and political effort to reassert Ainu engagement with multiple heritage actors, through inclusive approaches to heritage management. This project aims to align heritage practices with Ainu priorities through cultural, environmental and social empowerments.

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Biratori Town is traversed by the Saru River (*Sisirmuka* in the Ainu language) flowing from *Porosir* range to the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1). As mentioned, the town has one of the highest concentrations of Ainu residents, especially within the area of Nibutani. It has long been a centre of Ainu cultural practices and revitalization efforts, despite oppression and drastic changes to their ways of life under colonial policies and practices. The Saru River Basin experienced major disruption through dam construction projects in the late 20th century, which submerged sacred sites and disrupted *iwor*. These developments sparked local activism, leading to the recognition of Ainu rights and the eventual establishment of cultural revitalization initiatives.

4.1 Historical Evolution of Ainu-led Heritage Management

The proposed *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum is a culmination of over three decades of Ainu-led initiatives to reclaim stewardship of their heritage in the Saru River Basin (Okada, 2025, 2026a). This trajectory began as a resistance to the structural disruptions caused by settler colonialism and large-scale infrastructure development, most notably the construction of the Nibutani and Biratori Dams. In 1997, the Sapporo District Court delivered a landmark ruling in a case brought by Ainu landowners against the Japanese government concerning the Nibutani Dam. The ruling recognised the Ainu as an

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Indigenous people and acknowledged their right to enjoy their own culture, which encompasses the protection of natural environment and sacred sites essential to sustaining Ainu worldviews and practices (Levin, 1999).

Between 2003 and 2006, the Ainu Culture and Environment Conservation Measures Project was established to assess the impact of the Biratori Dam. Notably, many of the research team consisted of Ainu descendants, who documented tangible and intangible heritage embedded in the construction site (Nakamura, 2008, 2013). This project transformed oral histories, Ainu place names, and ecological knowledge into a formal database of over 198 place names and spiritual sites, such as *ci nomi sir* (places of prayer) (Biratori Town, 2006). It has since evolved beyond impact assessment to holistic heritage management around the dam sites, including the restoration and monitoring of vegetation and biodiversity, the documentation and practice of ritual protocols, and place-based educational outreach. A key hub for these initiatives is the *Nokapira Iwor* Visitor Centre, opened in 2022 near the Biratori Dam. The centre facilitates site-specific learning by enabling visitors to observe *ci nomi sir* and engage with narratives of community struggles and resilience in the face of destruction.

These localized efforts to recognize and re-engage with tangible and intangible heritage were elevated to national recognition when the “Cultural Landscape of the Saru

River Basin Influenced by Ainu Traditions and Modern Development" was designated as the first national Important Cultural Landscape in Hokkaido in 2007. This classification was notable for recognizing the entire river basin as a living landscape in which Ainu cultural and subsistence practices, resource use, and modern industries are multi-layered and interconnected. Successive designations also highlight persistent tensions. To sustain this cultural landscape, holistic stewardship of both tangible and intangible heritage has been considered essential. Such a goal necessitates not only Ainu participation in managing state-controlled areas, but also cross-departmental coordination within the local municipality (Yoshihara and Inoue, 2018).

Across these initiatives, the local community has widely accepted a more holistic engagement with Ainu worldviews as a guiding principle for Ainu cultural revitalization and heritage management. This shift subsequently led to a joint project, under the Tripartite Agreement for Forest of the 21st Ainu Cultural Inheritance, between the Biratori Ainu Association, Biratori Town, and Hokkaido Regional Forestry Office in 2012. Since 2019, this project has been operationalised by the Biratori Town Public Corporation for Ainu Culture Promotion, actively employing Ainu descendants with support from national subsidies under the Ainu Policy Promotion Act. It aims to regenerate portions of national forests as *iwor*, restore ecologically and culturally

significant vegetation and biodiversity, and create employment opportunities for Ainu community members through forest stewardship (Okada, 2025, 2026a). Building on this initiative's collaborative, publicly funded enactment of *iwor*, the local community and municipal government began to recognise the potential for extending the same relational, place-based logic beyond designated forest parcels. It sparked interest in reimagining the wider region as a connected heritage landscape shaped by Ainu values and everyday governance.

These milestones contributed to the development of a heritage ecosystem model by progressing from the visibility of rights to the consolidation of knowledge and national recognition. This trajectory fostered collaborative stewardship and the integration of public frameworks. Through Ainu agency and multi-actor cooperation, local governance initiatives have been bridging the nature-culture and tangible-intangible binaries and establishing place-based system of care that is grounded in Ainu worldviews.

4.2 Ecomuseum Principles and Interpretation Crafting in Practice

As the next stage in Ainu-led heritage governance, the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum aims to advance a sustainable framework for in situ heritage conservation, interpretation, and place-based learning through wider Ainu participation. Drawing upon the ecosystem

model, the ecomusem working group envisions the entire Saru River Basin as a “museum without walls” (Maggi, 2002). The working group designed this project to enable both residents and visitors to recognize, engage with, and care for heritage along the river. This reflects the historical interrelationship between the Saru River environment and human beings, incorporating archaeological sites, cultural landscapes informed by oral traditions, and areas of recent Ainu cultural revitalization (CATS, Hokkaido University, 2023, 2024). In this sense, the ecomuseum approach claims the heritage ecosystem along the Saru River Basin by emphasizing the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between human activity and the natural environment. Through place-based learning and in situ interpretation, ecomuseums aims to capture Ainu worldviews and revitalize traditional knowledge systems. Ultimately, the ecomuseum was conceptualised as a collaborative framework that transforms heritage from a static "museum culture" into a vibrant, co-created ecosystem of collective identity and future resilience (Okada, 2025).

The planning process since 2024 has involved a working group composed of Ainu community members and municipal officials. Based on four working group meetings held between July to February of the 2024 fiscal year, they have crafted interpretive themes, identified potential heritage sites and trails, and explored governance structures, including participatory decision-making frameworks. In 2024, the working

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group conducted a trail-monitoring tour aligned with proposed interpretive themes (CATS, Hokkaido University, 2024; Okada, 2025).

The working group places significant emphasis on interpretations that articulate the value of heritage from the local community's perspective. Ainu community members will play key roles in delivering these narratives, thereby providing opportunities to embody and transmit their ways of knowing through direct engagement with visitors. While some guides or interpretations draw from traditional knowledge systems, the emphasis remains on dynamic and contemporary relevance. Particularly, Ainu members from the working group have emphasised that these interpretations should avoid static or romanticized portrayals of Ainu culture and instead foreground the evolving relationship between people and place (CATS, Hokkaido University, 2024), because the Ainu members repeatedly observed that many non-Ainu visitors framed Ainu culture as past-bound or as a static "tradition".

The interpretative framework is structured around three thematic narratives, informed by earlier survey data collected during the nomination of the region as a national Important Cultural Landscape and expanded upon by the working group's discussions (ibid). The themes are as follows:

1. **"Landscape of the Saru River Basin through the Lens of Ainu Worldviews"**

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This theme explores sacred geographies that continue to hold spiritual and cultural significance for the local Ainu community. Drawing on oral traditions, it traces the relationships between places and cosmological stories, many of which were recognized during the designation of the Saru River Basin as a national Important Cultural Landscape.

2. **"*Iwor* and Traditional Ainu Lifeways in the Present"**

Focusing on the continuity of ecological knowledge and ritual practice, this theme highlights ecological knowledge (particularly information on the sustainable and ethical use of resources) passed down through generations. It is embodied through contemporary initiatives and museum activities that reaffirm the lived connections between people and place in the present.

3. **"Ainu Lifeways after the Modern Period and Pathway to Equitable and Inclusive Society"**

This theme addresses the profound transformations imposed on Ainu lifeways by settler colonialism, assimilation policies, and dam constructions. At the same time, it celebrates community-driven resilience and the ongoing efforts of Ainu and non-Ainu collaborators to revitalize heritage, envisioning pathways toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Each theme is accompanied by spatially mapped interpretive content delivered through trails, satellite sites (including cultural landscapes, archaeological sites and areas of recent Ainu cultural revitalization), and signage. To avoid framing Ainu culture as a relic of the past and, instead, communicate its ongoing significance to contemporary society, the project has employed continued discussion and development of the themes and interpretive strategies.

The project's achievements suggest the possibilities of Indigenous-engaged heritage practice in Hokkaido. Yet, these possibilities also require attention to the institutional, methodological, and relational conditions under which such work unfolds. The following discussion identifies several points of concern, not as a rejection of the project's aims, but as a way of clarifying the reflexive practices needed to support them.

5. Discussion: How the Ecomuseum Approach Fosters Ainu Heritage Ecosystem in Practice

The *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum is currently in the planning stage, building on long-term Ainu-led heritage initiatives. The planning phase constitutes a process of evolving authenticity, or a holistic reconsideration and reframing of Ainu heritage undertaken not only by Ainu descendants but also by other stakeholders. This approach aligns with the

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Gunma Declaration's emphasis on empowering communities to "adapt and appropriately transform their heritage" in response to contemporary needs and future aspirations (Gunma Prefecture and Japan ICOMOS, 2025, Recitals (7)). The project was established to serve as a platform for reconnecting socioecological relationships and Ainu agency. Therefore, the academic and practical significance of this project lies not solely in the eventual completion of a facility, but in the ongoing dialogue and the participatory planning process with Ainu and non-Ainu stakeholders. Through this process, we aim to restore Ainu stewardship and reintegrate the *iwor* as a living, relational system within the modern landscape.

The following discussion draws on the preceding analysis of Ainu worldviews, the heritage ecosystem framework, and the ecomuseum's planning process to identify three core schemes. These schemes correspond to the thematic narratives of the interpretation and the key issues of the Gunma Declaration. Specifically, the first scheme aligns with thematic narrative 1(Landscape of the Saru River Basin), addressing Recitals (3), (4) and (8), and Recommendation 2 (2), (3) in the declaration. The second underpins thematic narrative 2 (*Iwor* and Traditional Ainu Lifeways), and fulfils Recommendation 1, which calls for Indigenous-led transmission. Finally, the third corresponds to thematic narrative 3 (Ainu Lifeways after the Modern Period) and reflects Recitals (7) and

Recommendation 2, which emphasis collaborative governance and community-driven adaptation.

5.1 Bridging Ainu Worldviews and Heritage Ecosystem Thinking

Part of the appeal of the ecomuseum approach is its capacity to treat heritage as relational, encompassing cultural and natural processes, material and immaterial forms, and a wider community of actors beyond humans that have been fragmented by settler-colonial and modern infrastructure projects. Global heritage initiatives, such as the Ak-Chin Indian community's Him-Dak Ecomuseum in Arizona (Doğan and Timothy, 2019; Sutter *et al*., 2016) and the Quechua people's Parque de la Papa in Peru (Grey & Kuokkanen, 2020) demonstrate how community-driven ecomuseums effectively bridge traditional knowledge with modern resilience by their engagements in heritage governance.

Importantly, one of the thematic narratives of the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum, "Landscape of the Saru River Basin through the Lens of Ainu Worldviews," explicitly foregrounds the cosmological interdependence of humans and *kamuy*, reframing the basin as both an ecological system and a living spiritual landscape. This integrated vision is intended to offer the local community and visitors a conceptual bridge between

Ainu ontologies grounded in relational worldviews and the holistic, systems-oriented thinking underpinning the heritage ecosystem model.

However, as has been cautioned in previous cases (e.g., Grey & Kuokkanen, 2020; Nicholas, 2022; Schaepe *et al.*, 2020; Vrdoljak, 2018), the concept of heritage itself differs fundamentally between Indigenous and modern state ontologies and epistemologies. For many Indigenous peoples, including Ainu, the term "heritage" is absent from their languages because the concept is inextricably linked to daily life. Thus, these rigid categories often fail to capture the spirit of place, instead forcing Indigenous communities to justify their sacred bonds within alien colonial constructs (Rabliauskas, 2020; Vandenbussche, 2022).

Measures such as continuous Ainu-led discussions on interpretative themes, guide training, and trail monitoring offer practical alternatives to counter the imposition of a superficial, modern state ontology. Furthermore, the project requires maintaining a platform where Ainu and wajin residents collaboratively negotiate cultural knowledge and practices. As Rivière (1985) proposed, this ecomuseum model functions as a site for research, conservation, and learning, which necessitates strengthening collaborations with existing community learning initiatives such as the *Sisirmuka* Culture College and with individuals or groups dedicated to Ainu cultural practices.

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5.2 Facilitating Community-Driven Knowledge Production

The project also seeks to generate knowledge and empower the local Ainu community to lead heritage stewardship, in line with the Gunma Declaration (Recitals (3), (4), Recommendations 1). Since the planning stage, Biratori community members, including Ainu descendants, have actively participated in defining potential heritage sites, designing footpaths, and shaping interpretive themes grounded in oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and contemporary practices of cultural revitalization through the working group's discussions. In doing so, this project follows its aims to contribute to the local Ainu community's efforts to secure recognition, as observed by the author, and to challenge the persistent marginalization of their voice in Japan's heritage management (Okada and Gomes, 2024).

Fundamentally, the project is designed to enable Ainu members to take a more active role in interpretation, care-taking, and leadership within the ecomuseum. At this stage of planning, the project could benefit from broader Ainu involvement, consistent with one of the ecomuseum framework's goals. The author has observed that the same Ainu members, often representatives or active cultural practitioners, participate in initiatives, whereas broader local residents show little interest. In other words, there is a

core group of voices that is repeatedly present in Ainu-led initiatives in the region.

In the context of the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum, it is critical to recognize that contemporary Ainu society is not monolithic and that individuals maintain diverse identities, with varying frequencies and modes of cultural engagement. This issue is evident throughout ecomuseum discourse (Kincaid *et al*., 2019; Grey & Kuokkanen, 2020). Caution is required to avoid reifying ecomuseums as inherently inclusive, since participatory models can still homogenize the community into a singular, unified voice. For instance, workshops in Saskatchewan revealed an underrepresentation of certain groups, while women in Peru's Parque de la Papa had to actively assert their right to participate (ibid.).

Informed by these comparative cases, the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum project will reflectively analyse community power structures to identify and include the voices of those who have been historically marginalized in the planning process (Kincaid *et al*., 2019). This requires a specific effort to engage with a broader range of the Ainu community, including those with diverse cultural identities, beyond the core participants. Rather than assuming that participation is automatically inclusive, the project will continue to consider whose perspectives are missing and the impact of planning on those absent from current dialogues. This reflexive approach is intended to support a more

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accountable heritage ecosystem and to reduce the risk of reproducing simplified or homogenized accounts of Ainu worldviews.

5.3 Fostering Multi-Actor Co-Management and Ainu Agency

The *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum was designed to function as a collaborative platform that extends existing co-management arrangements, such as the Tripartite Agreement for the "Forest of the 21st Ainu Cultural Inheritance," into the cultural domain. This integration aligns with the interdependence of multiple actors advocated in Recommendation 2 of the Gunma Declaration.

While co-management aims to share power and responsibility between the state and local users (Plummer & FitzGibbon, 2004), researchers point out that such frameworks, while offering mutual benefits, often operate within state-dominated structures that can limit Indigenous autonomy by treating Indigenous peoples as mere stakeholders or cultural groups rather than sovereign rights-holders (Grey and Kuokkanen, 2020). As observed in the context of the Canadian national park system (Bruce and Mulrennan, 2024) and in the World Heritage nomination process (Vandenbussche, 2022), true shared governance is frequently hampered by the state's reluctance to amend foundational legislation, thereby keeping final decision-making authority within

ministerial discretion.

In Japan, administrative difficulties in identifying Ainu individuals and the lack of recognized mechanisms for collective rights under UNDRIP (Osakada, 2021) exacerbate these risks. In the absence of such structures, there is a recurring risk that co-management initiatives may fall into what Grey and Kuokkanen (2020) describe as the management of Indigenous sovereignty rather than heritage, a process of culturalization in which Indigenous rights are reduced to mere matters of cultural difference.

In Biratori, more than three decades of activism, negotiations, and engagement with national agencies have gradually led to the reclaiming of Ainu agency and stewardship over heritage. To navigate institutional barriers, the project must move towards knowledge co-production and coevolution, in which Western science and Ainu traditional knowledge are bridged to create mutually beneficial new knowledge while explicitly strengthening the Indigenous knowledge system (Berkes, 2009; Chapman and Schott, 2020). Following principles and a multi-stage process of knowledge coevolution proposed by Chapman and Schott (2020), the project necessities to ensure to establish representative governance structures, build capacity among all stakeholders, and avoid no single knowledge system dominating by identifying collective interests, culturally sensitive knowledge gathering for the unified interpretation and ongoing monitoring of

findings.

By operationalising these principles and stages, the Biratori project can evolve from tokenistic consultation towards sovereign stewardship within the Ainu heritage ecosystem. However, institutional constraints within Japan's heritage administration and Ainu policy necessitate a sustained process to modify such models to local realities. The project seeks to establish an Indigenous-led, multi-tiered governance structure that effectively integrates Indigenous legal orders with state frameworks, as demonstrated by the precedent models (Bruce and Mulrennan, 2024).

For the *Sisirmuka Iwor* Museum, these international precedents serve as a crucial template for a governance model that ensures Ainu agency. By framing management as a site of knowledge coevolution, Biratori can move toward realizing sovereign stewardship within existing institutional constraints, thereby keeping Ainu ontologies at the core of the heritage ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the Ainu-led heritage initiatives in Biratori, this study explored how an ecomuseum model has been mobilised to integrate the Gunma Declaration's heritage ecosystem and *iwor* frameworks into a participatory planning process. This

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process is designed to challenge standardised heritage management and the historical disenfranchisement of local Ainu stewardship.

As emphasised in Recital (7) of the Gunma Declaration, heritage is a continual process of adaptation; thus, the planning phase functions as an opportunity to actively rebuild socioecological relationships disrupted by settler colonialism. International efforts at World Heritage Sites, national parks, other protected areas, and ecomuseums demonstrate that Indigenous-led stewardship can link traditional knowledge with contemporary community resilience.

Despite these strengths, the study also highlights persistent tensions. To overcome systemic barriers and the lack of recognised mechanisms for collective Ainu agency in Japan, the project must ensure a shared decision-making process and promote a mutual advancement of distinct knowledge systems. Methodologically, it is imperative to critically examine the internal community power structure and the far-reaching social impacts on community members absent from the dialogue. This will ensure that the museum serves as a platform for empowerment rather than merely offering a superficial representation of Ainu culture.

In a broader sense, this study illustrates a transformative shift in Japan's heritage governance towards a reflexive approach that centres Ainu agency. By reclaiming

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stewardship within established state frameworks, the Biratori project not only contributes to the international decolonial discourse but also demonstrates how the re-emergence of Ainu worldviews can reshape state-centred heritage management. This integration ensures the Ainu heritage ecosystem remains a vital site of evolving identity and resilience.

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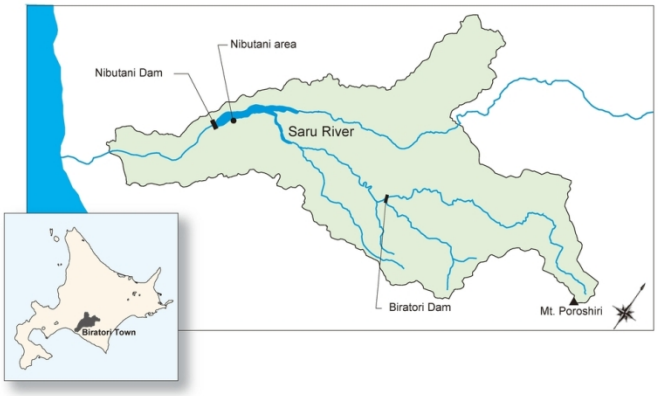
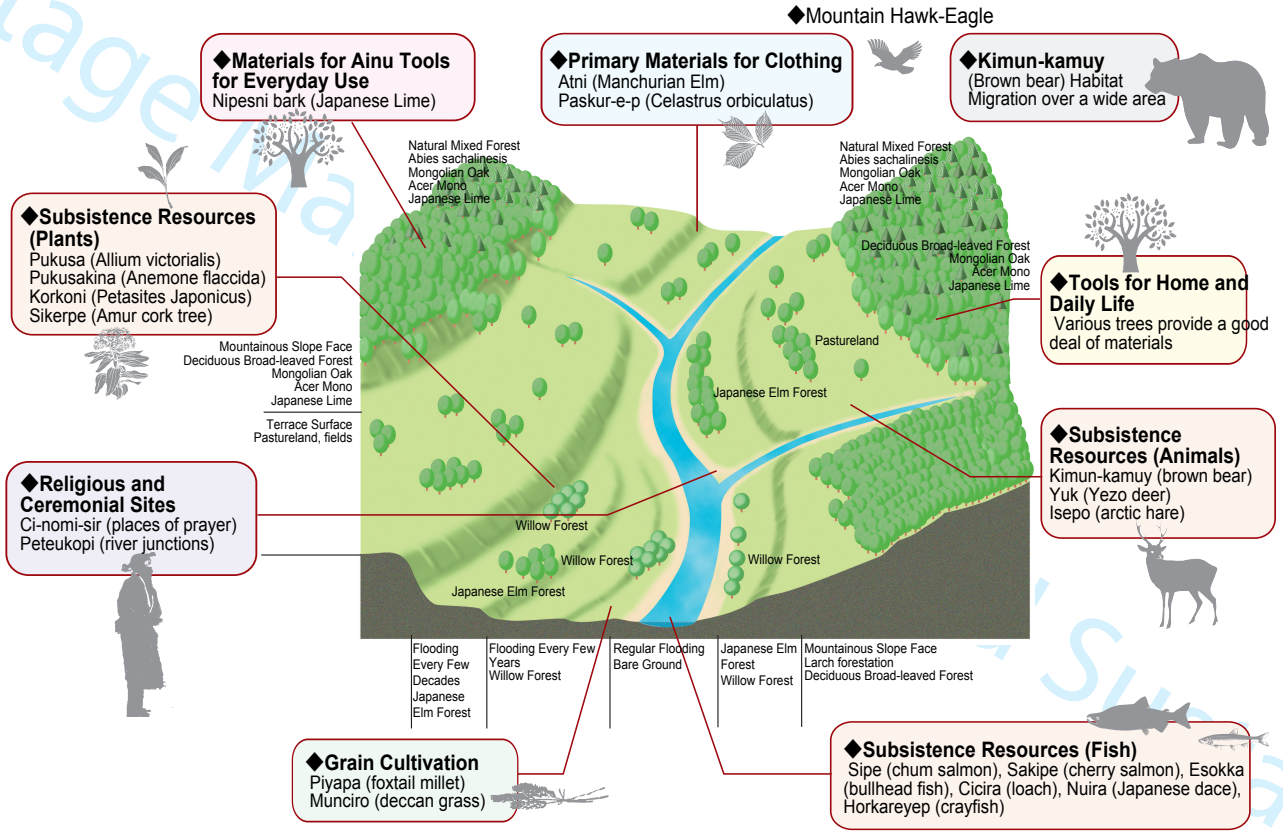


Fig. 1 Map of Biratori Town

215x302mm (150 x 150 DPI)


◆Mountain Hawk-Eagle
◆Materials for Ainu Tools for Everyday Use
Nipesni bark (Japanese Lime)
◆Primary Materials for Clothing
Atni (Manchurian Elm)
Paskur-e-p (Celastrus orbiculatus)
◆Kimun-kamuy
(Brown bear) Habitat
Migration over a wide area
◆Subsistence Resources (Plants)
Pukusa (Allium victorialis)
Pukusakina (Anemone flaccida)
Korkoni (Petasites Japonicus)
Sikerpe (Amur cork tree)
◆Tools for Home and Daily Life
Various trees provide a good deal of materials
◆Religious and Ceremonial Sites
Ci-nomi-sir (places of prayer)
Peteukopi (river junctions)
◆Subsistence Resources (Animals)
Kimun-kamuy (brown bear)
Yuk (Yezo deer)
Isepo (arctic hare)
◆Grain Cultivation
Piyapa (foxtail millet)
Munciro (deccan grass)
◆Subsistence Resources (Fish)
Sipe (chum salmon), Sakipe (cherry salmon), Esokka (bullhead fish), Cicira (loach), Nuira (Japanese dace), Horkareyep (crayfish)
Natural Mixed Forest
Abies sachalinesis
Mongolian Oak
Acer Mono
Japanese Lime
Deciduous Broad-leaved Forest
Mongolian Oak
Acer Mono
Japanese Lime
Pastureland
Japanese Elm Forest
Mountainous Slope Face
Deciduous Broad-leaved Forest
Mongolian Oak
Acer Mono
Japanese Lime
Terrace Surface
Pastureland, fields
Willow Forest
Willow Forest
Willow Forest
Japanese Elm Forest
Flooding Every Few Decades Japanese Elm Forest
Flooding Every Few Years Willow Forest
Regular Flooding Bare Ground
Japanese Elm Forest Willow Forest
Mountainous Slope Face
Larch forestation
Deciduous Broad-leaved Forest