

REVIEW OF *Japan's Ocean Borderlands: Nature and Sovereignty*.

In 1984, Studio Ghibli, under the visionary direction of Hayao Miyazaki, unveiled *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. This animation wasn't just a film; it was a clarion call to environmental consciousness. It narrated the gripping tale of Nausicaä, a warrior and pacifist, who embarks on a daring quest to halt the collision of two warring factions, striving to save a planet on the brink of ecological collapse. Set against the haunting backdrop of The Sea of Decay—a forest that symbolises the earth's absorption and regurgitation of pollution—this post-apocalyptic fantasy weaves an urgent environmental message into its core. Addressing the issue of environmental change is no easy task, even Miyazaki 40 years after *Nausicaä* is still trying to figure out the best way to communicate such messages.

In his more recent creation, *The Boy and the Heron*, Miyazaki delves into darker, more intricate themes, presenting a world where drama and the spectre of death are omnipresent. Yet, as the narrative progresses, it undergoes a metamorphosis—dark and empty landscapes burst into vibrant colours, symbolising hope and the potential for a reborn world. This theme, more relevant than ever, emerges as a potent and recurring motif in the Japanese auteur's body of work, where environmental concerns are not merely topics, but the pulsating heart of his storytelling.

In contemporary Japanese storytelling, birds like the heron in Miyazaki's latest film often serve as a bridge between the sacred and the profane. They guide characters through their journeys, symbolising the interconnectedness of all life. These birds are not mere characters or background elements; they are integral to the narrative, embodying themes of harmony with nature and the fragility of life. This cultural reverence for birds reflects a deep ecological awareness and respect for the environment, emphasising the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world. The presence of birds in these narratives acts as a subtle yet powerful reminder of the importance of conservation and the delicate balance that sustains all life on Earth. Within Japanese culture, birds are revered, symbolising beauty and freedom, and serving as crucial symbols in the non-human world.

The subject of birds plays a crucial role in the non-human world that is wonderfully crafted in Paul Kreitman's *Japan's Ocean Borderlands*, serving as both a symbol of ecological interconnectedness and a tool in the narrative of territorial sovereignty and environmental politics.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan strategically utilised the presence of birds to assert “sovereignty” over small uninhabited islands in the Pacific, such as the Bonin Islands (J. Ogasawara Shotō), a move that initially aimed at commercial extraction but later shifted towards conservation. This transition in approach not only reflects Japan's evolving environmental policies but also highlights, as argued by Kreitman, how concepts of nature can be intricately linked to national sovereignty and geopolitical strategy. Japan's interest in this period of the nineteenth century over these remote islands was primarily driven by economic motives. These islands, often rich in guano deposits, a valuable resource for fertiliser, attracted the Japanese government's attention. Turds from birds, especially seabird colonies that contributed to these guano deposits, became inadvertent tools in Japan's claim to these islands. Similarly, the extraction of feathers for the lucrative plumage trade, catering to a largely European and American market, played a role. For Kreitman, feathers transitioned from being an elite status symbol to a mass-market consumer product (p.67). By establishing the presence of abundant birdlife, Japan could justify its territorial claims based on the islands' economic utility, which was a common practice in international law at the time.

However, as global awareness of environmental issues grew in the latter half of the twentieth century, Japan's stance on these islands underwent a significant transformation. The focus shifted from commercial exploitation to conservation. According to Kreitman, the same bird populations that had been used to justify economic exploitation became central to Japan's efforts in biodiversity conservation and environmental protection (p.15). This shift was indicative of a broader global trend where ecological value started to become a legitimate basis for territorial claims.

This change in policy not only helped Japan to rehabilitate its international post-war image but also allowed it to reassert sovereignty over these territories through a lens of environmental stewardship. By positioning itself as a guardian of these ecologically rich areas, Japan reinforced its territorial claims, now grounded in the responsibility of preserving natural habitats and biodiversity. This strategy cleverly tied the concepts of nature conservation to national sovereignty, showcasing a unique approach where environmentalism and geopolitical interests intersect.

Japan's Ocean Borderlands offers a unique perspective on Japanese imperial and post-imperial history. By focussing on 'bird islands', Kreitman was able to peck away at the intricate nest of political, economic, and ecological connections within oceanic spaces. Using the concepts of frontiers (p.6) and borderlands (p.8), Kreitman interlinks the processes of globalisation, state-making, and colonialism. He employs an understanding of 'Islanding,' which refers to the process of delineating and asserting control over distinct geographic entities, often within the context of frontiers and borderlands. This concept embodies sovereignty, wherein a state or entity establishes its authority and identity through the demarcation and governance of these insular spaces, both politically and culturally.

Japan's Ocean Borderlands thus presents a critical environmental history of Japan's uninhabited islands from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Spanning seven core chapters that work both chronologically and geographically, the book delves into how the politics of conservation have become entwined with the politics of sovereignty. Kreitman utilises numerous case studies, many of which are set in current day contested spaces like the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai Islands and the South China Sea. He examines the transformation of bird islands on the distant margins of the Japanese archipelago and beyond, from sites of resource extraction to outposts of empire, and from wartime battlegrounds to nature reserves. Kreitman's study explores the interactions between the non-human and human worlds: the lifeworlds of birds, bird products, bureaucrats, beachcombers, sailors, soldiers, scientists, and conservationists, and how these interactions have shaped ongoing claims to sovereignty over oceanic spaces. The book offers insights into the complex relationship between sovereignty, territory, indigeneity, and environment in the modern world, highlighting how uninhabited islands have been both focal points of intense geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region and sites of nature conservation. The book's overall significance lies in its exploration of the role of the environment in geopolitical and imperial history, particularly in the context of Japan's oceanic territories. It provides a unique perspective on how ecological considerations can influence territorial claims and the interplay between environmental conservation and national sovereignty.

Niki J.P. Alford is Professor in Asia Pacific Studies and Director of Asia Pacific Institutes at the University of Central Lancashire. He is a Fellow of the Explorers Club, UK & Ireland Chapter and Fellow of both the Royal Geographic Society (with IBG) and the Royal Anthropological Institute. He is a Research Associate at the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS, the University of London and an Associate Member of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. In 2023, he was selected as the Ewha Global Fellow at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea.

As an anthropologist, Alford's research focuses primarily on Taiwan and the Pacific Islands. He is the book series editor for the Taiwan Series at BRILL and the Korean series at Routledge.

Alford is the author of *Transitions to Modernity in Taiwan: The Spirit of 1895 and the Cession of Formosa to Japan*, published by Routledge in 2017 and *Taiwan Lives: A Socio-Political History*, set to be published by the University of Washington Press in 2024.