

# Ramsar and World Heritage Conventions: Converging towards success

## Case study

O torii Gate, the giant torii gate that is part of the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine complex, Itsukushima Island, Japan (Credit: Lucas Vallecillos / Alamy Stock Photo)

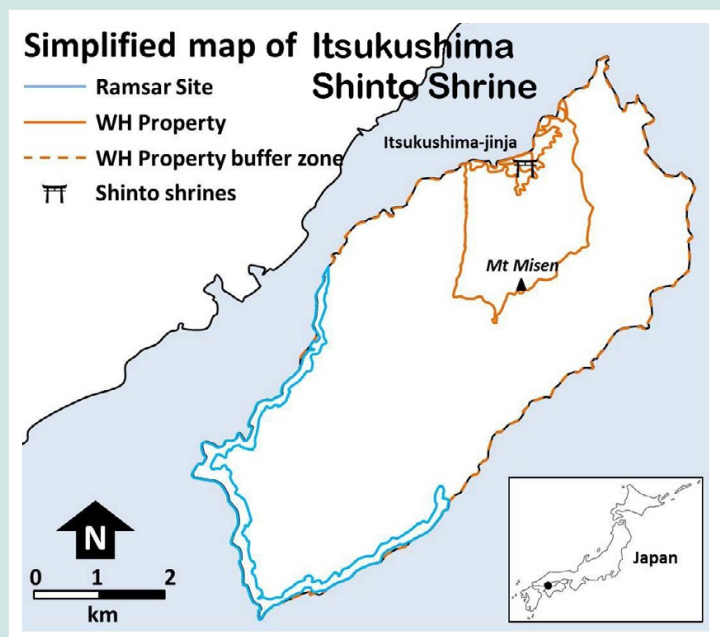
## Itsukushima Shinto Shrine, Japan

### Summary

The island of Itsukushima lies in the Seto Inland Sea some 10km south west of the city of Hiroshima. The island has been considered a holy place of Shintoism since the earliest times and is often referred to as “the island where god resides”. The island not only supports shrine complexes but it is also a combination of spiritual power and natural beauty, including extensive forests, relatively undeveloped sandy shores and the holy Mount Misen.

The World Heritage property covers 431.2 ha, with a wider buffer zone (2,634.3 ha) extending across the entire island and part of the sea in front of the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine. The property, inscribed due to its cultural values, comprises 17 buildings and three other structures forming two shrine complexes (the main Honsha shrine complex and the Sessha Marodo-jinja complex) and extends through a forested zone to Mount Misen. Shrines were probably established on the island in the 6th century, and the present shrine dates from the 13th century but is an accurate reflection of the 12th century construction style. The shrine is in the general tradition of Japanese Shinto architecture which embraces the trinity of man-made architecture in the centre, the sea in the foreground and the mountains in the background. The shrine is considered to be an outstanding architectural work which effortlessly integrates built elements with the natural setting.

The Ramsar Site is limited to a natural coastal strip covering 142 ha around the southern end of the island comprising sandy shores and intertidal marshes. Compared to other parts of coast of the Seto Inland Sea, the Site represents a well-preserved example of a coastal wetland. Spring water issuing from Mount Misen combines with the inflowing sea water to form brackish, grassy tidal marshes and sandy beaches. These habitats provide an ideal habitat for the endangered dragonfly *Orthetrum poecilop miyajimaensis*, a sub-species endemic to the island.



## Site Description

Lying in the northwestern part of Hiroshima Bay, the island of Itsukushima is some 10km long and up to 4km wide. Much of the island is forested and, in comparison to other coastal areas in Japan, the population density is relatively low. The island has been widely acknowledged as being one of the three most scenic areas in Japan, annually attracting up to 3 million tourists.

The island of Itsukushima is believed to be the dwelling place of a god and is venerated by the local inhabitants in the surrounding coastline and islands. Since ancient times, the locals have felt that the spirit of god is manifest in the shape of the surrounding mountains, with Mount Misen (530m) being the most important mountain. It is said that local people deified the god dwelling in the island as:

*“Itsukushima no kami  
(the god of Itsukushima)”*

and had originally worshipped this god from the opposite coast across Hiroshima Bay without landing on the island itself due to their belief that the land was sacred.

Around 811CE, and possibly earlier, points of worship were established on the margins of the island, and eventually, primitive buildings and shrines were constructed. Over time these developed, into a compound of main buildings and shrines. The shrine buildings which began to appear along the waterside emphasized the frontal views with the natural environment providing a backdrop, and, in particular, Mt. Misen and its ridge profile. Consequently, the entire area, from the water of Hiroshima Bay, through the large shrine gate in the foreground to the mountains in the background, came to be recognized as a unified natural environment surrounding the sacred shrine buildings.

The World Heritage property buffer zone includes the entire island of Itsukushima, including all of the Ramsar Site, and a portion of the sea area in front of the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine. These areas are also designated and protected under national and local laws including the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, the Natural Parks Law, the City Planning Law and the Forest Law. These laws control actions that could impact upon the current state of the structures, landform or vegetation with the aim of preserving both the natural and historic environment of the island.

## World Heritage and Ramsar designations

The site was inscribed on the World Heritage List for its cultural importance. The shrine buildings are considered to be an outstanding work combining man-made and natural elements. The built structures exhibit great artistic and technical value and are positioned so as to combine the sea along with the backdrop of the mountains. The result is a creative masterpiece which integrates perfectly the human

and natural forms (Criterion i). The setting of shrine buildings as the central part of a trinity with the sea in the foreground and mountains in the background is now widely recognized as a standard of beauty against which other examples of scenic beauty have come to be understood. It also provides invaluable information regarding the understanding of the evolving spiritual culture of the Japanese people and the concept of scenic beauty (Criterion ii).

The buildings of the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine are outstanding examples of the ancient type of Japanese shrine architecture which seamlessly integrates with the surrounding landscape (Criterion iv) and which contributes to the understanding of the ancient shintoism and expression of Japanese religion (Criterion vi).

The coastal strip comprising the Ramsar Site qualifies under two criteria: Criterion 2 and Criterion 9. By supporting 100% of the global population of the vulnerable endemic dragonfly *Orthetrum poecilops miyajimaensis* the coastal wetland habitats are considered internationally important. The ecological character of the Site also acknowledges the wider importance of the historical and cultural landscape of the island and that protection of human heritage contributes to the wise use of the wetland habitats.

## The role of cultural values, practices and traditions in wetland conservation

Extending from the built environment to the sea and to the mountains, the cultural heritage of Itsukushima integrates human and natural elements not just in the immediate vicinity of the shrine buildings but across the entire island. Therefore, the legal protection afforded to the island, primarily on the basis of the cultural heritage, inherently seeks to protect both the human-made and natural components. Similarly, the cultural values are intrinsically embedded in the forested mountain landscape and the coastal wetland habitats.

The recognition of the cultural value of the island has protected the valuable natural coast from development and conversion. Without this cultural link it is possible that, as for 60% of the adjacent coast around the Seto Inland Sea, the coastal habitats would have been lost and *Orthetrum poecilops miyajimaensis* would be extinct.

## Future outlook

Under a variety of legal instruments, the entire island of Itsukushima is protected from any actions that would alter the existing state of landforms or vegetation with the aim of preserving both the natural and historic environment. Two management plans have been established to prevent tourism and associated urbanization compromising the Outstanding Universal Value of the natural and historic landscape: the Preservation Management Plan of Itsukushima as a Special Historic Site and a Special Place of Beauty, set up by the Miyajima Town Government, and the Management Plan of the Setonaikai National Park, including the nominated



Rowing boat during the Kangen-sai Festival, the largest annual festival observed at Itsukushima Shrine and one of Japan's three major boat rituals (Credit: Keren Su/China Span / Alamy Stock Photo)

area, set up by the Environment Agency. Therefore with continued proactive management, and especially giving due consideration to the management of tourism, the unique combination of cultural and natural heritage at Itsukushima should be assured.

## Lessons learned

Japanese spiritual life is deeply rooted in Shintoism which centres on polytheistic nature worship, the origin of which goes back to primitive times. The combination of built and natural elements underpins the unique value of the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine. The management and protection of this spiritual, cultural and natural site provides some important lessons for other sites, including:

- The value of the island is an expression of the strong linkages between natural and built elements. By explicitly recognising these links and safeguarding them, legal instruments and proactive management are securing the site for future generations.
- Establishing a buffer zone in order to protect the wider environment and to secure essential aesthetic and wider cultural aspects of the landscape is vital to the long-term conservation of both the World Heritage property and the Ramsar Site.
- The establishment and implementation of a combination of laws to protect the heritage value across the island, including forest protection, city development and cultural aspects, provides useful legal backing for the maintenance of the Outstanding Universal Value and the ecological character of the wetlands.
- The management of tourists and limiting access, both in terms of physical access to areas and in terms of overall numbers, will be crucial to ensure that the cultural value is secured whilst also supporting the conservation of the wider natural heritage.