

# A Japanese Framework for Environmental Protection

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This short paper introduces a Japanese context to the broad-spectrum topic of 'environmental concerns'. Although Japan championed the Kyoto Protocol, domestically environmental issues remain low profile. Policy needs effective implementation and in Japan environmental advances have historically come about as a spin off from legislation generated by urban pressures leading to pollution. Human protection has always been lawmakers primary concern, and the Japanese public have participated actively in environmental affairs only when directly, and negatively, affected. Current environmental perspectives are reviewed through the literature, and thought is given towards Japan's national park system. Personalization of environmental issues is suggested as a necessity for generating effective Japanese public involvement in environmental protection in Japanese National Parks.

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## Introduction:

An effective framework for environmental protection must suit the needs of the country in which it is to be implemented. In Japan this has historically meant linking any environmental protection measures to some clear benefit for the human population. Selling environmental protection as a way to benefit people has proved more effective than trying to protect the environment per se. Where national parks are concerned, this raises a dilemma, as these areas of natural beauty have small resident human populations and therefore little of the population pressure of urban areas - pressure that in Japan has allowed effective environmental legislation to stem from human concerns.

## Environmental Perspectives:

Historically, human cultures have been "shaped to a large degree by the natural environment" (Huby 1998: 130). While nomadic cultures such as the Penan of Borneo live in a world where spirits are present in every aspect of the natural landscape (Davis 1998: 38), urban man in industrialized society has increasingly surrounded himself with a man-made environment. This continuing transition from natural to man-made surroundings has led to a

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wide range of environmental standpoints and a varied shaping of environmental perception for those involved. At one end of the spectrum people are an integral part of an ecosystem, and at the other they are the dominant, controlling factor. The latter is true for advanced capitalist industrialized democratic (ACID) societies and means that human attitude towards the environment, because humans have the power to alter that environment, is all-important.

Barrett and Grizzle (1999: 32-34) divide current environmental perspectives into three main categories, as follows:

**Biocentrism:** “Humans are members of the Earth’s community; all species are integral elements in a system of interdependence; all organisms are centers of life, each pursuing its own good; humans are not inherently superior to other living things.”

**Ecocentrism:** “An expansion of ‘life-centered’ biocentrism to include abiotic components of the environment.” There is some common ground with biocentrist views of the “inherent worth of nonhuman elements of the biosphere” but ecocentrists emphasis on interaction rather than individual species also gives common ground with anthropocentric views.

**Anthropocentrism:** Split into “strong and weak” schools.

**Weak Anthropocentrism:** focuses on provision of “basic human needs” such as nutrition, health, shelter, water and sanitation and education” and attempts to maintain the complex ecosystem “of which we are a part”.

**Strong anthropocentrism:** “the moral value of things is reducible without remainder to the value it creates for human beings . . . .” In this view environmental protection is only worthwhile if some readily observable (and short-term) human gain is apparent.

Inherent in these different positions is a measure of conflict. A “Deep Green” (biocentric) worldview argues that the natural world be put above human interests; no unsustainable exploitation is acceptable. Conversely, anthropocentrists argue “only human beings have intrinsic value . . .the rest of the world only merits protection if it is of value to humans (Huby 1998: 142). Surprisingly (in view of subsequent Japanese environmental policies) as long ago as 1941, the respected Japanese naturalist, Kinji Imanishi, was setting down a personal view close to the current biocentric model. Life, he proposed was defined by constant movement as organisms struggled for equilibrium with their environment. He noted that, like the pendulum of a clock, living organisms attain this equilibrium for only a brief moment. This ecological flux means that the environment, which Imanishi (2002: 25) defined as an extension of the body, is essential for all life and may be difficult to ‘measure’ in any meaningful way at any one moment in time It follows that environmentally destructive practices are by definition ultimately destructive to the organism itself. However, while individuals may pursue

biocentric or ecocentric philosophies, government policy has traditionally been entirely economically motivated.

### **Environmental Conflict.**

A conflict of interests is at the centre of most environmental crises. In Japan, high urban population density makes this conflict very obvious, and Japanese environmental protection has inevitably stemmed from anthropocentric concerns over pollution.

Schmidt (2000: 400-401) identifies three kinds of environmental conflict:

- Conflict in use. E.g. congestion from too many people using the same resource. This scenario occurs where a scenic spot becomes a 'victim of its own success', leading to endangerment of the resource. An example of this is the stress placed on high profile destinations at peak times of year, which the popularization of the Jomon-sugi trail (named after the Jomon era) in Yakushima's UNESCO sanctioned world heritage site illustrates<sup>1</sup>. The massive concentration of visitors on this trail at peak times has led to a need for sanitary facilities, trail improvements, and the erection of fencing to prevent damage to the tree itself. In addition, the access road has been widened and surfaced, allowing greater volume of traffic and access to large diesel tour buses.
- What is a resource? Is Yakusugi a commodity? Commodification destroys the very idea of "nature wild and free". Who owns the commodity does not change this basic problem. "Wilderness commands reverence; mere resources do not". There is now a ban on the felling of any old cedar therefore reducing the danger of the great trees disappearing entirely. However, this environmentally friendly move was prompted by the increasingly uneconomical returns from the lumber camp of Kosugi Dani (known locally as the Yakusugi graveyard) rather than by any environmental concerns. The great cedars are now recognized as being a valuable resource (again economic) in living form.
- Conflict in priorities. People may support a policy in theory but be unable, in practical terms, to follow their beliefs. For example, the ivory trade feeds many people. If locals cannot sell ivory then it will be better for elephants to make way for livestock. Nature's "long term survival depends on whether people can afford to share." Nature has to pay its way. Conflict over resource use and the resultant ignoring of dangerous levels of pollution at Minamata can be looked at in this way.

Nature is not an abstract concept. We all derive our food from natural sources and the environment therefore has direct bearing on the health of any human population. With carrying capacities near the limit, breakdowns in natural systems result in human hardship not just environmental degradation. This is particularly true for poor countries, where food

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<sup>1</sup> Sugi is a cedar tree of more than 1000 years of age. Jomon-sugi is estimated at a maximum of 6300 years old, which corresponds to the Kohya pyroclastic flow that denuded the island of all vegetation.

imports are not an option if local supply fails.

Theoretically, Japan's high standard of living should facilitate environmental conservation or preservation (Conservationists and Preservationists take, respectively, anthropocentric and biocentric approaches toward nature [Schmidt 2000: 399]). However, it would seem that authorities have other priorities. Interestingly, a Japanese survey carried out from 1972-75 (covering the oil crisis) found that 3-5 times more people preferred to pay more for a cleaner environment than those who would allow environmental degradation to save money (McKean 1981: 21). It appears that the Japanese public is rich enough to avoid any conflict in priorities over its approach to conservation at home.

The pressure to manage in a certain way may also spring from public sentiment. In this respect Japanese attitudes to nature are anthropocentric. Saito Yuriko (in Brecher 1999: 87) says, "in Japan nature is not loved or respected for its own sake but because it allows one to escape . . . . This appreciation of nature not only implies an anthropocentric attitude . . . but also suggests [an] ineffectiveness in generating an ethically desirable justification for protecting nature." The response is often to package and sell the countryside as a 'natural' product, something Moon (1997) comments on when talking of commodification in the context of rural village revitalization in Japan.

Nishimura (Kira and Terada (eds) 2000: 225) talking about the attitude towards nature and land use in Japan says that *fukei* represents the landscape as a whole, inclusive of nature, while *keikan* (Landscape) "implies manipulation of *fukei* rather strongly". The distinction between the two words acknowledges environmental manipulation as intrinsic (though not exclusive to) the Japanese attitude to nature. Land use needs to be viewed in the context of history, religion and culture. Nishimura asserts that Japanese tradition values coexistence with nature, but the human dominance implied makes this viewpoint anthropocentric.

Schmidt's 'conflict in use' category is perhaps the most obvious problem in Japan, where high population densities put pressure not only on the natural environment, but on man-made surroundings as well. Ironically, in Japan it has been this very conflict that, due to resultant pollution, has led to the implementation of environmental legislation.

### **Exporting the Problem:**

One solution has been for Japan to take resources from other countries. Japan's shadow ecology (the environmental impact of one country's economy on resource management in another country) has been wide ranging, but difficult to assess due to the fragmented nature of decision making in Japan and the unintended effects of government (ODA and loans), corporate (investment, technology transfers, buying and distribution patterns) and trade actions. However, some statistics speak for themselves: Japan has been the world's largest tropical timber importer since the 1960's. From 1990 - 95, Japan imported three times more tropical plywood than China, the world's second largest importer. More than 80% of the

Philippines remaining primary forest disappeared in the 1970's - 80's. Sabah was also logged out between 1972 - 87, when Japan consumed 60% of log production (Dauvergne, 1997). Clearly this is unsustainable practice, but because it happens overseas it generates little or no domestic pressure in Japan. Conflict of use occurs, but in another country and it is therefore for somebody else to deal with. By way of aid, Japan has provided development loans for roads and ports in Indonesia, but this helps facilitate logging.

### **Resolving conflict: Social Policy and the Environment.**

Finding common ground between economics, human needs and the environment is currently the focus of much attention (Morito 1999: 60). At the base of this problem is economic conflict, sometimes relating to problems as fundamental as getting enough food to eat. Schmidt (2000: 397) says that even where people's environmental values are similar, they may act contrary to those values because they "cannot afford to act in accordance with them". This 'conflict in priorities' is often the result of economic necessity and not peoples value systems. Schmidt proposes that such environmental conflict cannot be resolved unless the underlying economic conflict is first dealt with. Lomborg (2001: 33) too, on the issue of poverty says that economic development is a prerequisite of environmental protection. If traditional systems of land management (for example), were low intensity and fairly sustainable, today's society places more strain on the environment by dint of numbers alone. An escape from poverty gives people the option to be concerned with the environment. This argument highlights the artificiality of traditional approaches and the need for integrated problem solving when tackling environmental issues.

There is an age-old idea that to preserve the environment we must sacrifice the economy. Politicians since the Rio summit have taken an ecological stand without doing anything. This will continue until (a) people realize it is "the corporate hegemony" that perpetuates the economic-environmental clash fallacy or (b) the environmental crisis is so severe that not addressing it is political suicide (Brecher 1999: 129-31).

Three major areas common to most environmental controversies are environmental protection, provision of basic human needs, and advancing economic welfare. Simultaneous attainment of these goals is both achievable and necessary in bringing about a workable solution to the problem of environmental protection. Too often in the past only one aspect has been presented. To keep the environmental agenda high profile, environmental organizations have a vested interest in presenting a gloomy picture (Lomborg 2001: 331-2). Business meanwhile has stressed the merits of job production and ignored environmental consequences. When decision makers in business, conservation and government don't choose mutually beneficial paths, the result is negative externalities (air and water pollution are the standard examples). (Social) Science has a role in identifying natural-social interdependence and therefore formulating appropriate policy (Barrett and Grizzle 1999: 27-29).

Finding solutions, or a process, that involves all concerned parties is therefore necessary. This means not ignoring or marginalizing any issues, economic, social or environmental. "From a practical point of view it is unproductive to ignore the environmental contexts in which people live and then expect that these people will turn out to support environmentally responsible aspirations and practices." Any proposed solution must include humans and a "direction for human action" (King 2000:117).

#### Conclusion:

The concept of integrated solutions is important for environmental protection where, for success, local people have to see both the beauty and the benefits of a natural environment. This may be doubly so in the Japanese context, where even at the height of environmental protest in the 60's and 70's, Japanese activists mostly perceived themselves, rather than the environment, as the victims (McKean 1981:31). Several of the conditions McKean identifies for engaging the "latent capacity" of citizens in the environmental debate are difficult to meet in the Japanese context. Davidson (2000: 31) identifies a bottom up approach to conservation involving public participation in setting and implementing objectives as having "intrinsic value", but the reality of Japanese political culture is more passive. Additionally, McKean sees 'a pressing issue, related to personal concerns' as a necessary factor in prompting the general public to participate in any kind of citizens' movement. We might expect then, in a society where political protest is not widespread, that institutions such as the National Parks Authority would receive little support from the Japanese public. These areas of nature, though popular as recreational destinations, hold little of the personal importance that was instrumental in prompting people to join environmental protests in the 1960's and 70's. As a result, the challenge for areas such as Yakushima is to personalize people's perception of National Parks and thereby motivate the Japanese public to participate in looking after the long - term future of its own environment.

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