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JAPAN

The Japanese environment is so riddled with industrial effluent and agricultural chemicals that in 1973 the entire populace panicked before the threat of a nationwide epidemic of 'pollution diseases', incurable human disorders resulting from exposure to intense environmental pollution. (Huddle and Reich, 1975, p. 22)

In the 1980s, Japan boasted 80 to 90 percent of the world's 'smoke scrubbing' facilities for cleaning sulfur dioxide, one of the worst air pollutants, from smokestack gases ... Japan reduced pollution in other ways: increased efficiency in energy use, moving noisy factories out of Tokyo and recycling programs. In view of what had gone before, this turnabout was as miraculous as Japan's economic growth achievements. (Broadbent, 1998, p. 15)

The Japanese archipelago has been inhabited for over 13,000 years and for this entire period the people have coexisted with a remarkably rich flora and fauna. The early Japanese chose as their home a mountainous country composed of nearly 4,000 islands extending 3,000 kilometres from north to south. Located close to the intersection of three tectonic plates, Japan has been subjected to seismic and volcanic activity throughout its history. Nevertheless, this somewhat inhospitable island chain has maintained an extremely large population for centuries and is now one of the most densely populated countries in the world, supporting a population of 126 million in 1999. Japan began the transformation to a predominantly urban society from the late 1860s onwards and now has around 80% of the population living in the major cities and towns.

Japanese people are well educated and affluent with the large majority (up to 90 percent) describing themselves as middle class. Adult literacy is near 100 percent and educational attainment is on the increase with currently approximately 48 percent of all students per annum advancing to higher education. Quality of life for most Japanese is relatively good and life expectancies are high (77 years for males and 84 for females). It is generally argued that the Japanese are a homogenous race with existing literature referring to the fact that ethnic groups represent only 1 percent of the total population (although 3 percent may be a more realistic figure).

## INFLUENCES ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENVIRONMENT

*Japanese Philosophies of Development and the Environment*

From 1868 onwards, the West heavily influenced the cultural development of Japan. However, as one of the few Asian countries to avoid colonisation, the Japanese were able to successfully control the influx of ideas, philosophy, science and technology. As a result, these external influences were carefully melded with existing Japanese philosophical and cultural frameworks. While the Judeo-Christian tradition made some inroads, Shintoism and Buddhism remained by far the most powerful forces shaping the Japanese view of the world. The popular perception that the Japanese have a special relationship with nature perhaps even derives from their Shintoistic beliefs and the view that gods inhabit the rivers, trees and mountains. In addition, Buddhism adds an important dimension to the man-nature relationship, claiming that divinity resides in the fabric of the natural universe.

Japanese attitudes to nature have tended to be an enigma to non-Japanese observers. Traditional Japanese art, philosophy, literature and religious belief suggest a sensitive kinship with the natural world. Leading philosophers such as Watsuji Tetsuro explain what they claim to be the 'uniqueness' of Japanese people and culture in terms of a particular set of environmental influences or *fudo* (climate) which lie at the heart of *nihonjinron* – the philosophy of being Japanese.

Undeniably, the most fundamental changes in the people-environment relationships in Japan were a result of the successive industrial revolutions from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. However, it was not until 1964-65 that national consciousness of wider environmental problems came to the fore following the dramatic post-war economic expansion. A number of major pollution incidents occurred at this time, including mercury poisoning at Minamata and the reaction from government and industry was slow.

Shaped by this bitter experience, a substantial body of Japanese environmental thought emerged in the mid-1970s. At this time, Japan developed one of the most complete statutory frameworks for environmental policy in the world. Citizen groups were very active and in many areas local government led the way with the development of innovative policies. Unfortunately, this momentum was not maintained in the 1980s, when environmentalism took a serious backward step in Japan as people enjoyed the extravagancy of the 'bubble economy'. It was only in the early 1990s that the Japanese began to reassess the situation as it became clearer that global concerns over sustainability and what constitutes a healthy environment would require the development of more environmentally benign lifestyles in industrialised countries like Japan.

### *Media Treatment of the Environment*

With some of the highest newspaper circulation rates in the world, the media in Japan have played a decisive yet inconsistent role in the coverage of environmental issues. Initially, regional branches of national newspapers were left to deal with the pollution issues and their head offices in Tokyo concluded that such news did not merit national attention. However, the situation gradually changed with the average space devoted to environmental issues in newspapers growing from 0.4 percent in 1960 to 2.8 percent in 1972. News coverage on television quadrupled between 1960 and 1970.

Global environmental issues are also receiving increased attention from the media. The Asahi newspaper, for example, had only one article on the global environment in the whole of 1985, but this coverage gradually increased to peak at 1218 articles in 1992. The number of articles dropped to 402 by 1996. Despite this exposure, there are some commentators who claim that the media in Japan is still far too complacent about environmental issues and generally tends to avoid criticising the public administration, the governing parties and potential private sector sponsors.

### *State of the Environment*

Japan has a comprehensive and effective environmental monitoring system and has been reporting on environmental issues since the 1970s. Some of the most serious environmental problems in Japan at the moment include:

- Control of nitrogen dioxide and suspended particulate matter levels from automobiles in urban areas is proving very difficult and there are increasing concerns about the potential for young children and the elderly to fall victim to this pollution.
- Absolute CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from Japan are high (5.1 percent of the world's total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions)
- Trans-boundary pollution from neighbouring countries is a growing concern with acid rain levels now similar to those found in Europe.
- Control of organic pollutants has proven more difficult with eutrophication occurring in inland water areas and bays around Japan.
- Dioxin emissions from inadequate incinerator facilities (around 30 percent of existing plants are sub-standard in terms of performance) are causing major problems in some localities.
- There is growing public concern about the potential impact of endocrine disrupting chemicals (environmental hormones).
- The most recent version of the Red Data Book shows that 7 percent of mammals, 8 percent of birds, 22 percent of amphibians and 11 percent of freshwater fish are threatened with extinction.

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