

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Protecting the global environment



Clean energy
(Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

Waste Disposal and Recycling

The amount of general (non-industrial) waste in Japan has become an issue, exceeding 50 million tons a year since 1990. Garbage disposal sites are expected to reach their limit in a few years, and the burning of waste results in dioxin pollution, so recycling has become important as a solution for reducing the amount of trash.

The ratio of used paper collected in Japan in 2008 was 75.1% of production volume, and the utilization rate (percentage of used paper reprocessed in paper manufacturing) was 61.8%, one of the highest used paper recycling rates in the world.

The implementation of the Receptacle Packaging Recycle Law in April 1997 places the responsibility for recycling polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles and glass bottles on the manufacturers. These receptacles comprise 20-30% of the total weight of general waste matter discarded by households, but, because of their bulk, they occupy 60% of the total volume. This law is based on dividing the cost of garbage disposal among companies, consumers, and municipalities, as compared to when disposal costs were formerly covered by taxes. When consumers discard a receptacle, they are required to presort it for the designated municipality pick-up areas, where it is collected for recycling by the manufacturers. Beginning in April 2000, paper and plastic

packaging will also be subject to recycling under this law.

Electrical products discarded by Japanese households are almost all disposed of in landfills. The Specific Household Electrical Appliance Recycling Law was enacted in 1998 in an effort to reduce the volume of such landfill disposal.

Environmental Protection Movements

Compared to environmental protection groups in Western countries, similar groups in Japan are on a smaller scale and have a short history. The largest group in Japan, said to be the Wild Bird Society of Japan, has a membership of 50,000. The World Wide Fund for Nature Japan also has a membership of 50,000, when corporate members are included, and the Nature Conservation Society of Japan has a membership of 20,000. Japan has more than 5,000 small environmental preservation groups. These groups, instrumental in carrying out grass-roots efforts, have a small membership but are expected to make great strides in the future. Environmental NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are also active overseas.

There is also a national trust movement, where a group of people band together to split the cost of a piece of land (in an area that is being environmentally destroyed) to preserve it. Such land can also be donated to the trust. The trend spread nationwide from the initial core movements in Shiretoko, Hokkaido, and Tenjinzaki, Wakayama Prefecture. Preservation is not limited to forests and marshes, but also covers green tracts of land in the cities. To promote markets in environmentally friendly products, materials, and services, private groups and corporations, local community groups, and the Environment Agency (now the Ministry of the Environment) formed a network in February 1996 to

encourage buying of this sort. Guidelines were issued to consumers to give priority to buying products and services that do not harm the environment.

The municipalities in each locality are doing their best to encourage regional developments that take the environment into consideration, such as conserving energy and recycling. Yakushima, a Kagoshima Prefecture island that is designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, is trying to preserve the environment through such measures as reducing trash disposal to a minimum by composting kitchen garbage and recycling discarded cooking oils as automobile fuel.

To aid students in developing independently an awareness of environmental preservation and in carrying out studies about the environment, the Environment Agency in June 1995 called for the participation of elementary and junior high school students in the Junior Eco Club. Independent activities include aquatic life checks, astronomical observation, empty-can recycling, as well as exchanges sponsored by administrative offices throughout the nation. As of 2008 there were 4,126 groups and approximately 185,000 people taking part in these initiatives.



Tenjinzaki Natural Environmental Preserve
The national trust movement in Japan got its start with efforts to preserve the natural environment of the Tenjinzaki Cape in Wakayama Prefecture. (Photo Courtesy of National Trust Tenjinzaki)

An automobile factory

At Toyota's Tsutsumi factory in Toyota, Aichi Prefecture, efforts are underway to bring the factory into closer harmony with the environment, by planting trees and making use of solar energy. (Photo courtesy of Toyota Motor Corporation)



Japan's Environmental Cooperation

At the 1992 Earth Summit-United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Japan promised to contribute 900 billion to 1 trillion yen (upward of US \$7.9 billion), over a five-year period starting in fiscal 1992, to ODA (Official Development Assistance) for environmental cooperation. In that five-year period, the total actual amount of ODA disbursed for the purpose of environmental cooperation was 1.44 trillion yen (US \$13.2 billion).

Japan's ODA program covers a range of environmental concerns. Examples include water maintenance, sewer services, trash disposal, and environmental pollution measures such as disaster prevention, forest preservation, and prevention of atmospheric and water pollutants. Energy conservation and new energy technologies are among the focal points of Japan's environment cooperation. In accordance with the Initiative for Sustainable Development toward the 21st Century, which was announced by the government in 1997, Japan is engaging in many environmental cooperation efforts, one example being the establishment of an acid rain monitoring network in East Asia. To deal with global conservation issues that cannot be solved through bilateral cooperation, Japan is also actively participating as a key contributing nation in various international organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Concern and interest among Japanese companies in afforestation and recycling both at home and abroad is growing, and this in turn is contributing to a deeper awareness among the general public. Mitsubishi Corporation, a major Japanese trading company, is currently undertaking experimental projects in Malaysia and Brazil aimed at restoring tropical forests.

Once a forest is destroyed as a result of clearing, its soil is eroded by heavy rains. Restoring such places to their original state is said to take between 300 to 500 years, but recent research on afforestation techniques based on a concept put forth by Miyawaki Akira, professor emeritus at Yokohama National University, is now making it clear that recovery can be achieved in shorter periods of time.

In addition, many trading companies and paper manufacturing companies have actively committed themselves to afforestation abroad.



Ecotourism

(Photo courtesy of the Mitsubishi Corporation)