

# Japan's Global Environmental Policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s: Changing from an Eco-Outlaw to a Green Contributor

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**Although** the environment had been on the international political agenda since the early 1970s, it was in the late 1980s that global environmental politics rose to prominence after several important environmental events. These included the discovery of the ozone hole above the Antarctic in 1985, the world's worst nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1987, and extraordinary heatwaves and droughts in 1988 which seemed explicable by the theory of global warming. The politicization of the global environment, however, can not be explained merely by new scientific knowledge and related events. At the end of the Cold War, developed countries suddenly jumped on the environmental bandwagon for a new collective identity. For instance at their Paris Summit meeting in 1989, the Group of Seven leaders devoted one third of the Economic Declaration to the environment. Behind this movement lay not only a growing environmental awareness among people but also the emergence of a new need among individuals, corporations and governments to appear green.<sup>1</sup> Like the principle of human rights, the principle of global environmentalism broadly sets out the context in which norms define behavior appropriate to "green" individuals, corporations, and states. In Western countries, wildlife and forest protection was a central element of environmentalism. Many citizens had internalized a preservationist norm-humans should not kill wild animals such as whales and elephants or destroy primeval forests for mere human consumption.

Japan also attempted to project a green identity, but in a different way. Its green identity was not only constituted by global environmentalism, but also formed through its interaction as an emerging economic superpower with other states, and within the context of the policy legacies of its domestic environmental policy in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, its green identity was formed and projected in the contexts of the international and domestic structures. In the late 1980s, when as an economic superpower, Japan was increasingly expected to implement the principle of "Japan contributing to the world," it started to pay special attention to the global environment. For Japan, it was an ideal area in which not only to expand its business opportunities abroad but also to make a major international contribution, using its financial and technological capabilities for pollution control and energy saving. Japan identified itself as a state that had overcome pollution and promoted energy efficiency while pursuing economic development. The Japanese government believed that such experience was of great importance to developing countries seeking sustainable development. On the other hand, international wildlife and forest protection was given a lower priority in Japan's initiatives in protecting the global environment. During the economic boom of the late 1980s, Japan also increased its imports of living resources and extended its fishing activities on the high seas, which in turn caused "wildlife friction"



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arne KALLAND, "Whose Whale is That? Diverting the Commodity Path," in Milton M.R. FREEMAN and Urs P. KREUTER, eds. *Elephants and Whales: Resources for Whom?* (Basel, Switzerland: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 163.

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<sup>2</sup> Brendan F.D. BARRETT and Riki THERIVEL, *Environmental Policy and Impact Assessment in Japan* (London: Routledge, 1991), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline THOMAS, *The Environment in International Relations* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Mark BRAZIL, "The Wildlife of Japan: A 20th-Century Naturalist's View" *Japan Quarterly* (July-September 1992): 338.

<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that Japanese awareness of cross-boundary environmental problems arose later than in other developed countries partly because this island nation had suffered relatively little from earlier cross-border problems (such as acid rain) in comparison with Europe and North America. Suggested in Hanns W. MAULL, "Japan's Global Environmental Policies" in Andrew HURRELL and Benedict KINGSBURY, eds., *The International Politics of the Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 357.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Japan ratified in 1987 the 1980 Law for the Regulation of the Transfer of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Other examples are Japan's 1980 ratification of the 1972 Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Waste and Other Matter (London Dumping Convention); and its 1980 accession to the 1971 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention).

between Japan and other countries. Indeed for example, Japan was the world's largest market for fish, whale meat, elephant ivory, and tropical timber. In this context, Western environmentalists singled out Japan as an environmental predator.

Japan's increasing contributions in the environmental area were not always appreciated, despite its intention to respond to international expectations and criticism. Skepticism toward Japan's environmental contributions is clear in the following statement by Brendan BARRETT and Riki THERIVEL:

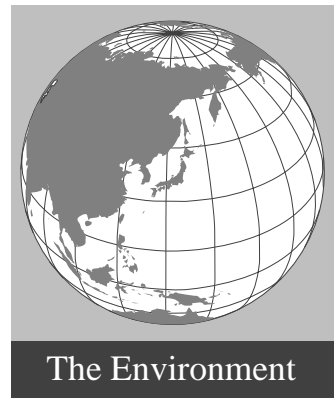
The EA [Environment Agency]'s inability to broaden the scope of environmental policy has led it to become over-reliant on technological aspects of pollution control. Of great concern is Japan's wish to export this approach to developing nations. The approach presupposes that only money and technology are needed to solve global environmental problems. Although the progressive financing and 'technology-forcing' legislation which Japan has implemented so successfully are essential to solving global environment problems, a more fundamental change in value is also needed to attain sustainable development.<sup>2</sup>

Then as now, members of "social ecology" and "deep ecology" movements tended to be skeptical about the effectiveness of technology as a means of solving environmental problems.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Japan's willingness to confront the global environmental problem by hosting international environmental conferences came under suspicion. Mark BRAZIL states:

Hosting major international conferences is merely a way of obtaining maximum publicity and widescale international approval, thus further enabling the government to absolve itself of its duties and responsibilities without actually taking any concrete action.<sup>4</sup>

The international community did not take seriously most of Japan's contributions on environmental matters in the 1980s.

When it came to substantive environmental policies that might work against its business interests, moreover, Japan was slow to commit itself.<sup>5</sup> In many cases, Japan took longer than other developed countries to ratify international environmental conventions.<sup>6</sup> Japan's initially passive stance on the issues of ozone depletion and global warming created an impression of unwillingness to tackle global environmental problems.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the issue of ozone depletion, it was not until 1988 that Japan acceded to the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. Along with the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, Japan opposed the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. Furthermore at the



London Conference in March 1989, Japan initially opposed a joint EC-US proposal to phase out some ozone depleting substances by the year 2000, changing its stance only on the last day of the conference.<sup>8</sup> After Japan was criticized for its reluctance to follow the general trend in the ozone depletion issue, it attempted to play a more active role with respect to the global warming issue.<sup>9</sup> At the November 1989 Noordwijk Conference, however, Japan again found itself opposed to the setting of specific targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions.<sup>10</sup> In these cases, Japan was criticized in the international arena, not because it was implicated in the degradation of the global environment, but because it was initially reluctant to participate in constructing the international regimes to deal with these problems.

By 1992, however, environmental criticism of Japan was already on the wane. Faced with the severe international criticism mentioned above, around 1990 Japan adopted more positive environmental policies. For instance, Japan started to take more active stances on the issues of ozone depletion and global warming. In March 1989, Japan finally agreed to the joint EC-US proposal to phase out ozone depleting substances by the year 2000.<sup>11</sup> In October 1990, it set a goal for stabilizing its carbon dioxide emissions in the Action Program to Arrest Global Warming.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Japan accepted a worldwide ban on ivory trading in October 1989.<sup>13</sup> In November 1991, Japan also agreed to a total ban on driftnet fishing on any high seas from January 1993.<sup>14</sup> In the words of John KINGDON, these actions seem to have been a result of a series of "policy windows," namely "opportunities for pushing pet proposals or conceptions of problems" in the global environmental issue area from 1987 to 1992, a period when major international environmental conferences were held one after another.<sup>15</sup>

Second, with more positive environmental policies, Japan also became more active as a sub-chair nation in the preparations for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In the UNCED process, emphasis was placed not on uncompromising "preservationism," but on the concept of conservation or sustainable use/development. This trend enabled Japan to make a realistic contribution by positioning itself between the developed countries, which were more inclined to stress preservation of the environment, and the developing countries, which looked to promote economic growth. In fact Japan was highly regarded, especially among developing countries, for pledging the largest amount of additional environmental aid to these countries.<sup>16</sup> Japan's way of "greening" through technology also matched the spirit of the conference. Principle 9 of the Rio Declaration provides:

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- <sup>7</sup> See Miranda A. SCHREURS, "Policy Laggard or Policy Leader?: Global Environmental Policy-Making Under the Liberal Democratic Party," *The Journal of Pacific Asia*, vol. 2 (1995): 3-33; Miranda A. SCHREURS, "Domestic Institutions and International Environmental Agendas in Japan and Germany," in Miranda A. SCHREURS and Elizabeth C. ECONOMY, eds., *The Internationalization of Environmental Protection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 134-161.
- <sup>8</sup> AIHARA Masayoshi, *Chikyû kankyô to hosen* [The Global Environment and Conservation] (Tokyo: Chirekisho, 1990), 134-135.
- <sup>9</sup> Environment Agency, Global Environment and Economy Study Group, *Chikyô kankyô no seiji keizaigaku* [Political Economics on the Global Environment] (Tokyo: Daiyamondosha, 1990), 119.
- <sup>10</sup> Linda STARKE, *Signs of Hope: Working Towards Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 22.
- <sup>11</sup> AIHARA, *Chikyû kankyô to hosen*, 135.
- <sup>12</sup> Government of Japan, *Environment and Development: Japan's Experience and Achievement* (Tokyo, December 1991), 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *How Japan is Dealing with Global Environmental Issues* (Tokyo, 1990), 12.



### Notes

<sup>14</sup> *Nihon keizai shimbun*, 26 November 1989, (evening edition), 1, 19. In 1991, Japan also surprised attendants of the 1991 conference for the parties of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty by abandoning its long-held developmental policy for Antarctica. *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 May 1991, (evening edition), 5.

<sup>15</sup> John W. KINGDON, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995), 20.

<sup>16</sup> *The Financial Times* (15 June 1992). After the Rio Summit, MADDOCK and SCHREURS suggested that domestic, structural and political forces could make Japan a global or regional environmental leader in the near future. See Rowland T. MADDOCK, "Japan and Global Environmental Leadership" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* (Winter 1994): 45-46.; SCHREURS, "Domestic Institutions and International Environmental Agendas in Japan and Germany," 158.

<sup>17</sup> *The Financial Times*, 15 June 1992; *The Press*, 17 June 1992; *The Economist*, 13 June 1992, 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> Economic Planning Agency, *Keizai hakusho: Heisei 4 nenban* [Economic White Paper: 1992] (Tokyo: Ministry of Finance, Printing Bureau, 1992), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Bank of Japan, International Department, *Comparative Economic and Financial Statistics: Japan and Other Major Countries 1993* (Tokyo, 1993), 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> *The Daily Yomiuri*, 1 May 1998, 3.

States should cooperate to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, and by enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of technologies, including new and innovative technologies.

Fortunately for Japan, the United States became the new target of environmental criticism when it weakened some of the provisions of the climate change convention and refused to sign the biodiversity convention.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, "Japan bashing" in general began to fade around 1992. The Japanese economy started to slow down in the middle of 1991,<sup>18</sup> with the economic growth rate falling to 1.3 per cent in real terms the following year.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the level of Japanese overseas direct investment declined sharply from 1990 to 1992.<sup>20</sup> As Japan's economy weakened and the US economy grew stronger, Americans began to view Japan differently. According to a survey conducted for the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs between February and March 1998, the image of Japan for the American public became the most positive in the survey series.<sup>21</sup> As a result of these factors, international environmental criticism of Japanese economic activities waned. For now, few countries believe that Japan will dominate the world economy and insensitively destroy the global environment.



### Related Websites

The Environment Agency of Japan:

<http://www.eic.or.jp/eanet/index-e.html>

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/index.html>

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):

<http://www.unep.org>

World Conservation Union: <http://www.iucn.org>

World Resources Institute: <http://www.wri.org>