

THE ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Recently such problems as global warming, acid rain and water pollution have received a lot of attention in the news media. To many people, though, environmental problems seem rather remote. Unless something affects us personally we tend not to pay much attention to it. This lack of attention to the environment, however, is precisely what is causing these problems to get worse. By the time we wake up and realize just how serious the situation is, it may already be too late. The world may already be so environmentally devastated that it will be beyond repair.

How serious is the problem? In first-world countries such as Japan and the United States (where I am from) we are sheltered from the full effect of environmental destruction. The problem is essentially that first-world countries are producing and consuming too many products. On the one hand, these products use up natural resources. We must cut trees, dig mines, and destroy landscapes in order to get the raw materials to make these products. Since Japan is an "island country" with few natural resources, we often can't see the full effect of environmental destruction caused by our demand for natural resources. But if you go to other countries you can see exactly what is happening. In Malaysia and Brazil, rainforests are being cut and the logs are being sent to first world countries such as the United States and Japan. In Japan, some of this wood is used to make plywood forms which are used for pouring concrete at construction sites. The plywood forms are also used once and then burned. More trees must then be cut in Malaysia. Companies which import timber into Japan are delighted because they can make an enormous profit by constantly selling new timber to Japan. We can't see this environmental destruction because it's taking place in other countries, but we are the ones who are responsible for it. Our democratically elected governments fail to put pressure on construction companies not to burn plywood forms, and we fail to raise a protest. As a result the lives of thousands of native people who live in the rain forests where this wood comes from are disrupted. In Malaysia, the people who live in the forests are called the Penan. They depend upon the forest for food and shelter. They have been living this simple and peaceful lifestyle for ages, but now they are being forced out of the forests by big companies which want the timber for their own profit. We are destroying their entire way of life. We would not like to have our way of life changed by outside invaders, yet we are destroying entire cultures just so that we can have more consumer goods and our companies can ring up more profits. The destruction of American Indian cultures in America and of Ainu cultures in Japan is being repeated in the rain forests of Brazil and Malaysia by American and Japanese companies that are only interested in money and who care nothing for the people whose lives they are destroying. This is why many third world countries are asking rich nations such as Japan and the United States to send them money for the environment. Since our countries are the ones that are responsible for much of the ecological damage and since we are the ones who benefit most from it, we should also take the responsibility for paying for the damage we have done. Yet the leaders of the United States and Japan are unfortunately reluctant to do this.

Making the products we consume also requires enormous amounts of energy. Most of this energy is nonrenewable, such as oil. Once it's gone it can never be replaced. Some renewable sources of energy such as solar power, wind power, and water power, could supply many of our energy needs, but it is presently cheaper and more profitable for big companies to use oil and nuclear energy. Burning oil creates much pollution, however, and we still do not know how to properly dispose of nuclear wastes. The procedures we use to produce our products can also be harmful to the environment. Industrial wastes pollute the air and rivers, contributing to acid rain and global warming. Some chemical wastes are so hazardous that they also cannot be disposed of properly. Nobody wants these wastes in their own backyard and sometimes they are shipped to poor countries which are willing to accept our hazardous wastes in exchange for money. Again, we can't see the environmental devastation taking place in these countries, but we are responsible for it.

Once the products we consume have been made and once we have used them, we must also dispose of them. Not only must we dispose of the product, we must also dispose of the packaging. Packaging creates an enormous amount of garbage, and most

of it is unnecessary. Soft drink bottles are a good example. In the past there were glass bottles which could be returned to the store after we were finished with them. When I was a kid we used to go out and collect these bottles so that we could get a bit of extra spending money. The soft drink companies would wash the bottles and reuse them. Nowadays, though, we can't even find these bottles in the stores. Instead we find disposable plastic containers that we use once and throw away. They can't even be recycled. Companies find it more profitable to use disposable plastic bottles than to take the time to recycle used glass bottles. The consumers don't have a choice. If we want to drink soft drinks we're forced to be polluters of the environment.

Despite what we hear about "technological progress" products are getting worse, not better, and they are being used up more quickly. During my entire childhood my family had just one television. It was made in the 1950s and lasted for 25 years before it finally broke down and we had to buy a new one. A few years ago I bought a television made in the 1980s. It lasted about 10 years before it broke down and we had to buy a new one. Why is it that a television made in the 1950s lasts longer than a television made in the 1980s? Is this technological progress? The problem is that companies now deliberately make products that will break down after a few years. This is called planned obsolescence. If my television breaks down after just ten years I have to buy a new one. This is great for companies who can make more profit selling me another television. I can't even repair my old television because the company no longer makes parts for it. Every so often companies come out with "new improved" products which are supposed to make our lives better, but which in fact just keep us buying and buying new products, spending more and more of our money, and making the rich richer and richer. The companies get more and more profits while the lifestyles of ordinary people do not improve. G.N.P. goes up and up while houses get smaller and smaller, food gets more and more expensive, and the people are working longer and harder. Our quality of life is actually decreasing, rather than increasing, because of our consumptive lifestyles. Clearly new technology is not the answer. Technology is one of our biggest problems.

Who is to blame for the present environmental crisis? There are three major groups of people who could be doing something really significant about the environment but who are failing to: ordinary people, companies, and the government. As we've seen, the environmental problem is caused mainly by our enormous consumption of products. This is a result of our materialistic values. Many of us would like to be rich, live in expensive homes, eat expensive food, drive expensive cars. A lot of people don't really care so much about expanding their mental abilities, developing their creative talents, or having deep and satisfying relationships with other people. Instead, they think that they will have a better life if they have more material goods. But they are unable to discover real happiness because of their blind pursuit of pleasure and comfort. They spend more of their time pursuing dreams of material success than they do enjoying the life they already have. Why do students study so hard, for example? Is it because they really want to learn something, to find out what the world is really about, or simply because they want to go to a good high school so that they can be accepted at a big university and eventually get a job in a big company? Why do salarymen and factory workers work so hard? Is it because they are really creating a better life for themselves and their families, or simply because they are caught up in the materialistic idea that having more things means a better life? I'm not saying we shouldn't study hard or work hard, but that our study and work should really make a better life for ourselves, one which is in harmony with nature and one which gives us the time to explore our fullest potential as human beings. The mindless pursuit of consumer goods and a materialistic lifestyle not only harms the environment, it also harms our ability to live lives that are truly meaningful. In the meantime, while we are busy living our comfortable first-world lifestyles, the rest of the world lives in poverty and despair. And most of us simply do not care.

The second group which could be doing more about the environment are companies. In our capitalistic economic system companies are interested in one thing and one thing alone: profit. Companies will do whatever it takes to make a profit. If the choice is between having a good environment or making a profit, companies will choose making a profit every time. Recently some companies have undertaken advertising campaigns to make it seem as if they are concerned about the environment, but in reality most companies are more interested in projecting a good image to the public than they are in helping the environment. This tactic is called "greenwashing" — what the companies are really interested in is maintaining profits, not preserving nature. The profit motive can be seen very clearly in many construction and development projects: (1) Golf course construction is a good example. Many trees must be cut to make golf courses, and the chemicals which are used to fertilize the grass seep

through the ground and eventually end up polluting rivers and water supplies. Golf course memberships are extremely expensive, however, and have become status symbols for the wealthy to show off. (2) The 1996 Olympics, held in Nagano, Japan, is another example. A lot of nature was destroyed to make new ski slopes and facilities. Enormous profits will be made by the construction companies which build these new facilities, but it is ordinary people who will have to pay for these projects through increased taxes. (3) The new linear motor car which is proposed for construction between Tokyo and Kofu is another example. The Maglev is being advertised as a high-tech way of "bringing people closer together." We'll be able to travel between Tokyo and Kofu in just one hour. An enormous amount of money is being spent for research and development on this project. But will the Maglev truly improve our lives? Probably not. The cost of riding this train will more expensive than the Shinkansen. Real estate companies are making fortunes by buying and selling property along the proposed route, but homeowners are also seeing their property taxes increase. Small businesses in Kofu will be forced to close down because it will be more convenient for people to do their shopping in Tokyo. There will be a vast amount of ecological destruction since the construction will involve cutting many trees and building many tunnels. All of these projects show that technology and new development are not really making our lives any better. Quite the opposite. While companies profit and the rich get richer, the quality of life of the average citizen gets worse and worse, and the environment is destroyed. Is all this expense and trouble worth it, just so that we can travel from Tokyo to Kofu in one hour?

The third group which could be doing something about the environment is the government. In a true democracy, government would be used to control the big corporations so that they truly acted in the best interest of citizens. But in fact our governments usually support the interests of big corporations rather than the interests of ordinary citizens. As matters now stand, ordinary people have no control over the activities of big corporations. Countries such as the United States and Japan call themselves democracies, but how much real democracy is there? Not very much. In both countries there are scandals which show that the politicians of today are more interested in having a cozy relationship with big business than they are with protecting the interests of ordinary citizens. The laws which have been passed to protect the environment are too weak and ineffective to make a real difference. Governments often tell us that if we try to protect the environment, the economy will suffer and people will lose their jobs. This is simply a lie. The goal of environmentalists is to create a sustainable economy. A sustainable economy is simply an economy that provides for our genuine human needs without destroying the resources of future generations. It is different from our present high-growth economy which is able to give our present generation an extravagant lifestyle only by destroying the resources of future generations. Certainly it is not possible for us to have both a high-growth economy and a good environment. But it is possible for us to have both a sound, sustainable economy and a good environment.

What, then, is to be done? When most people think of acting environmentally, they think of recycling milk cartons, planting trees, and cleaning up garbage. Certainly these are good projects to start with, but since the problems are much deeper than this, the solutions must also go much deeper. First, we must fundamentally change ourselves. We must see that the environmental problem will not be solved until we change our own orientation away from consumer-oriented materialistic lifestyles towards simpler lifestyles. Instead of pursuing luxury and extravagance for ourselves, we must work to provide the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, and a clean environment—to all people of the world, including the third world. Second, we must regain control of what corporations are doing. As consumers we must agitate for better products which will last a long time, not be overpackaged, and be environmentally safe. As workers in companies, we must agitate for more democratic control. We must ensure that production is based on satisfying genuine human needs rather than corporate profits. Third, we must make government truly responsive to the voice of the people. We cannot and will not tolerate government scandals. We should not feel obliged to listen to supposedly democratic governments which no longer listen to us. We are not ignorant slaves who must bow down before government authorities, but a free people who elect governmental officials to represent us. If the corporations and government will no longer listen to the voice of the people, then we are no longer living in a true democracy. Many of us naively believe that the government and our leaders will take care of us. But our leaders seldom have the views of ordinary citizens in mind. So it is up to us to see that our leaders are in fact acting for our benefit and not just for the benefit of corporations and politicians. Communism is a failure, but capitalism also has not yet proved that it is capable of creating a

society which is truly democratic, truly free, and truly in harmony with nature. If capitalism and communism are both failures then we must look for new alternatives and work for an entirely new political and economic system which will show that "people power" is stronger than corporate greed and government indifference. Citizens in the Philippines, Korea, China, and Thailand have used "people power" to pressure their governments to be more democratic. In my own case, as an American, I can read the Declaration of Independence which states that if a government ceases to protect its citizens' rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ". . . it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government." The power for change is in our hands not in the hands of our leaders. This is what true democracy is all about.

Since I'm a teacher by profession, I'm especially interested in what students can do to help the environment. Students often become disillusioned with studying because their purpose is not to learn something about the world, but only to pass exams. So rather than trying to find out how the world really works and what they can do to make it a better place, they end up spending their free time on idle amusements. But because there are so many real problems for us to be concerned about, we don't have time to waste reading comics, playing video games, and watching television. These are tools of oppression which deliberately keep young people from thinking about more serious problems, such as the environment, and involving themselves in social change. As long as our minds are occupied with comics, video games, and television, we're not thinking about the future, about what kind of world we'd like to live in, about how we're going to create that world. Maybe this is just how companies and the government want it, because then we aren't challenging the present system and questioning it. We're passively accepting whatever our consumer culture tells us is right rather than making decisions for ourselves. A real education doesn't just prepare us for a job in a company, it liberates us, it challenges authority, it helps us to change the world. And we teachers also have a responsibility not just to prepare students for examinations, but to open their minds, broaden their view of the world and help students become full partners in our common life on this planet. Many teachers do not take this responsibility seriously, however, so it then becomes the students' responsibility to try to get a real education for themselves in any way they can, even if it means, for example, reading books other than those assigned by their teachers.

Something everyone can do to help the environment is to get involved with local grassroots citizens groups in their areas. People in the United States often volunteer time, energy, and money to various activities that make people's lives better. This "volunteer tradition" is not yet very strong in Japan, but it is increasing. Recently hundreds of citizens groups have sprung up throughout the country which are working to prevent environmental destruction in Japan. Here are some examples: (1) In Ishigaki, Okinawa citizens groups are working to prevent the construction of an airport which would destroy a precious coral reef. The reef is one of the finest coral reefs in the world and the issue has drawn support from countries around the world. (2) In Mie and Aichi prefectures citizens are trying to prevent construction of a dam across Japan's last free-flowing river, the Nagaragawa. While the dam is supported by both the government and construction companies, it would do very little to improve the lives of local residents. In addition it would destroy important fish and waterlife. (3) Recently a Japanese citizen, Yoichi Kuroda, won the prestigious Goldman Award for environmental action in Asia. The award is something like the Nobel Prize. Several years ago Mr. Kuroda started a group called the Japan Tropical Rainforest Action Network, which is trying to prevent Japanese companies from importing timber from the tropical rainforests of Malaysia. (4) In Hachioji, where I presently live, we have a Japanese citizens group which is trying to preserve Mt. Konpira. There are plans to destroy a third of the mountain and in order to build a new school and sports complex on the site. The construction company is eager to begin the project, and the same company has plans to develop a golf course and apartment complexes in the forests and mountains nearby. This will mean enormous profits for the company, but for local residents here it will mean more overcrowded conditions in our town and the destruction of nature right near our homes. There are also groups in Hachioji which are working to prevent the construction of a tunnel through Mt. Takao as part of a proposed new beltway (the Ken-o-do). Do we really want to see these mountains destroyed just so that people can play golf and drive their cars more conveniently? These are decisions we have to make here and now in our community, and other communities are being forced to make similar decisions. This is the meaning of the green slogan, "Act locally, think globally." If we all decide together to support the environment, life will be better for all of us. If we each decide to destroy our own small part of the world, life will be worse for all of us. If we as human beings destroy our natural environment, we destroy our own life support system. Time is running out. It may already be

too late for us to pass on an environmentally safe world to our children and grandchildren. We must change now.

The citizens groups I have been talking about express the voices of ordinary citizens about the environment. Often they are organized by housewives and retired people, because housewives and retired people have more free time and don't have to worry about being fired from a job because they are agitating for social change. But students can help too. In the past student movements have helped to bring attention to major social problems. Students in many countries are organizing groups to study about the environment and to influence government and corporate leaders. They are peacefully demonstrating for environmental protection and trying to raise public awareness about the seriousness of the problem. There is no reason why Japanese students couldn't be doing the same thing in Japan. They also have a lot of free time and don't have to worry about losing a job because they are agitating for social change. Students can organize study groups, join existing citizens groups, find out what's going on, and discuss environmental issues with their teachers and friends. If students keep their activities firm and insistent, but nonviolent and positive, they can have real influence.

The goal of environmentalists is to create a society which takes care of the real needs of all people and which also fully protects the environment so that we will be able to pass it on to future generations. This goal seems much better to me than the goal of our present consumer culture, which tells us to consume more and more, keep profits high, and enjoy as many luxuries as we can. I personally do not want to live in a world where people in some countries, such as Japan and the United States, can drive expensive cars, play golf, and go shopping in big department stores while people in other countries in the third world do not have adequate food to eat, water to drink, or houses to sleep in. Environmentalists are not violent radicals who want to tear down our present society and plunge the world into anarchy. Rather, we are responsible citizens — ordinary teachers, office workers, housewives, and students — who nonetheless want to challenge consumer extravagance, corporate greed, and government indifference. By making fundamental changes in our present political and economic system, everyone in the world will be able to have a healthy, comfortable, and environmentally sound lifestyle.

Kazuko Shiraishi

ALLEY RAT

I am a city rat.
I trick the pigs
And scurry up an alley.
I am an evil player.
This rat has kept off starvation
As a thief as long as he can remember.
I am a thief of love, food, money, passion.
I am suspicious of everybody
In the back alleys of the city.
“ Kick this stud out!”
But who can kick out the
Dark night in a rat's eyes?

(From Seasons of Sacred Lust, 1968 Shichosha Publishing Company)