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**Beyond Green
Rhetoric**

Environmental Groups, State
Policy, and the Limits of
Ecological Action in Japan

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LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The academic attention on Japan's environmental policy, religious traditions, and tourism evolutions has largely developed in separate binaries, with limited integration across domains. Research on shinto and environmentalism has primarily focused on the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of nature veneration within Japanese religious traditions. In this context, the work of Aike P. Rots (2017), Morris-Suzuki (2015) and Reitan (2017) on shinto-related constructions provided me essential theoretical basis to critically analyze primary sources, such as official Jinja Honchō and shrines websites. In this regard, Watsuji Tetsurō's *Fudō* (1935) and the works of the intellectuals who followed him also serve as an important point of reference for understanding the line of thought behind the modern relationship between the Japanese people and nature.

Concerning the civil society and environmental policy within the Japanese legal and institutional framework, Kagawa-Fox (2012) and Pekkanen (2006) studies were particularly influent. Their research was a precious resource in the interpretation of the government releases through white papers, as well as for providing a comparative model with past policies. These studies have effectively documented the weakness of Japanese environmental organizations, which I used as analytical criteria for the Isahaya and U-Tan cases.

In conclusion, studies examining tourism as a potential tool for ecological and local revitalization are few in number and mainly limited to the Japanese academic sphere. Furthermore, the majority of these works analyze specific cases from which to derive general conclusions. In this sense, the journal *Kankyō Shakaigaku Kenkyū* represents an excellent, up-to-date source on the topic.

As mentioned before, the fundamental gap in existing literature, lies in the absence of an integrated investigation of these three domains as interconnected systems. Indeed, this thesis try to addresses this weak point by demonstrating that the contradictions and limitations observable within each individual sphere cannot be fully understood without reference to the broader historical patterns that have shaped all three.

That being said, this work is organized around the following three research questions:

(1) How do religious and nationalist discourse about Japanese people's relationship with nature, interact with institutional structures to shape the possibilities and limitations of environmental activism in Japan?

(2) To what extent is such narration reflected in the society's approach toward the environment?

(3) How can sustainable tourism and civic groups contribute to fighting this system and revitalizing rural economies while respecting the environment?

要旨

近年の傾向としては、環境問題に関する議論は世界中でますます注目されている。それぞれの国は、環境保全のために必要な対策を決める上で重要な役割を担っている。日本もこの世界的な流れの中で例外ではなく、環境への責任を求める声が高まっている。本研究は、日本における環境管理について考察し、日本の制度的・政治的な枠組みの中で環境団体がどのような活動を行っているかを検討するものである。本研究の目的は、環境保全、地方の活性

化、そして持続可能な観光という観点から、市民社会と行政との協力に伴う課題とその可能性を明らかにすることである。

第一章では、神道と環境保護に関する学術的な議論を概観する。神社本庁、伊勢神宮、下鴨神社といった公式な情報発信の場を踏まえながら、神道の環境保護に矛盾があると指摘する研究者と、いわゆる「神道環境主義」を支持する研究者の両方の立場を簡単に紹介する。そこから見えてくるのは、「Shinto Environmental Paradigm」と神社の実際の取り組みとの間に大きなずれがあるということである。このずれは、日本に対する国際的なイメージの形成や、似非環境主義的な考え方の広がりにも影響を与えている。

第二章では、このずれが日本の環境政策や取り組みにおいても一部見られることを示す。関係省庁の公式データと国際的な気候指標を比較すると、近年、温室効果ガス排出削減や持続可能な技術の導入において大きな進展があったことが分かる。しかし、こうした対策は経済や企業の動きによってしばしば妨げられている。実際、生物多様性や地域の自然保護のための活動の中心であり、一般市民との重要な架け橋であるはずの NGO や NPO は、資金不足や国からの認知不足に苦しんでいる。それは、政府がしばしば企業を優先しているためである。

最後に第三章では、観光をこれまでの二つの地域課題が交差する重要なテーマとして取り上げる。観光は、経済的な利益と地方の活性化を結びつける可能性を持つ資源である。いくつかの事例研究の分析を通して、良い結果と

悪い結果のそれぞれに大きく影響した要因を明らかにし、両者の持続可能な
バランスを実現するための方策を探る。

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the debate on environmental issues has gained increasing global attention. Every nation plays a crucial role in determining the measures necessary for ecological preservation. Japan is no exception to this global shift in priorities and the growing call for environmental responsibility. The present study explores environmental management in Japan, examining the activities of environmental groups within the Japanese institutional and political framework. The research aims to highlight their potential in terms of environmental conservation, rural revitalization, and sustainable tourism, as well as the difficulties inherent in the collaboration between the civic society and government bodies.

The first chapter provides an overview of the academic debate on shinto and environmentalism. Drawing on official dissemination channels, such as Jinja Honchō, Ise Jingū and Shimogamo Jinja websites, this section briefly presents scholars who highlight contradictions within shinto's approach to environment protection, contrasted with those who fuel the so-called "Shinto environmental paradigm". What emerges is a significant gap between a "green rhetoric" and actual shrine practices, which contribute to shaping the perceptions of Japan internationally and in spreading pseudo-environmentalist ideas.

In the second chapter, I highlight how this discrepancy is partially preserved when looking at Japanese environmental policy and initiatives. A comparative analysis of official data from competent ministries alongside international climate indices demonstrates that, despite significant strides toward emission reductions and the integration of sustainable technologies in recent years, such measures are often compromised by the excessive interference of economic and business dynamics. Indeed, NGOs and NPOs—which should function as the primary agents of activism for biodiversity and regional nature preservation, as well as vital intermediaries with the general population—struggle due to a

lack of funding and state recognition, as the government frequently privileges corporate enterprises.

Finally, the third chapter addresses tourism as a central point of intersection for both the regional needs identified in the preceding chapter: a resource capable of merging economic benefits with peripheral revitalization. Following a brief introduction on the evolution of tourism in Japan, the cases of Shirakawa-go and the Toyooka Crane project will be analyzed as successful examples of this combination, highlighting their distinguishing features and conditions for replication.

CHAPETER 1 - Shinto, Nature and Environmental Thought: Historical Developments and Contemporary Debates

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century the world saw an increasing attention to the environmental condition of our planet. The fast industrialization and economic growth after the Second World War brought a wave of innovation and development in Japan, but taking with them also critical pollution and consumerism backlashes. Japan, while holding the record of having one of the highest levels of forest coverage worldwide —second only to Finland— also ranks among the largest consumers of plastic and consistently performs poorly in climate change performance indices¹.

¹ It holds the 57th position in the index of this year 2026, receiving a low rating in terms of GHG emissions, energy use, and renewable energy and a very low in climate policy.

GERMANWATCH, *Japan*, in “Climate Change Performance Index”, in Climate Change Performance Index, 2026, <https://ccpi.org/country/jpn/>, 25-02-2026.

Nevertheless, taking a look at the academic discussion about environment and ecology, it is not uncommon to run into the complete opposite rhetoric, exalting Japanese appreciation and respect for natural environment.

As I will try to unfold in this chapter, this trend is closely connected with Japanese spirituality, especially with shinto, to the extent that it has come to be defined as paradigmatic by critics: shinto environmental paradigm.² This section delves into the historical-philosophical roots of such a relationship and provides an overview on how it is declined in the modern era, trying to reveal its contradictions.

What emerges from this analysis is the portrayal of shinto as a “religion” or a cultural tradition characterized by an apparent marked ecological awareness, behind which, there seems to be little substantial foundation. The ideas underpinning this line of thought, as I will try to underline through this first part of my work, seem to be more closely tied to nationalist principles than to environmental concerns.

Within this work shinto will be treated as a set of traditions of Japan bounded by a certain degree of coherence, rather than a religion (although, for the sake of convenience, I will often refer to it by the latter term). The nationalistic turn that shinto took in the period leading up to the Second World War has, in fact, made its position ambiguous, placing it in a grey area between religion and tradition.³ Indeed, the majority of the authors considered in this analysis —

² See Aike P. ROTs., *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*, London, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, ch. 4; Here defined as a trend that conceptualizes Shinto as a nature-based worship tradition, explicitly linking it to environmentalism and conservation.

³ Cf. Jun'ichi ISOMAE, “The Conceptual Formation of the Category ‘Religion’ in Modern Japan: Religion, State, Shintō”, *Journal of Religion in Japan*, 1, 3, 2012, pp. 226-245.

although existing different variations and schools of thought of this creed — approach shinto, questionably, as a unique cultural tradition and a way of being Japanese.

1.1 Theoretical foundations and evolution of the paradigm

The importance of the natural environment in Japanese society can be dated back to ancient times, to the artistic representation of Japanese landscape elements; however, its systematic association with shinto and ecology in academic discourse is much more recent, originating in the early twentieth century. Against this backdrop, the book *Fūdo*, published in 1935 by Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960) marked a decisive turning point. In his book he introduces the climate theory, which became a theoretical pillar for the next generations of scholars. Climate (風土 *fūdo*, in Japanese characters) is there intended as a broad term to denote all the features of a natural environment of a given land, natural phenomena included. Watsuji rejects the notion of climate as merely an object of scientific inquiries, claiming that it is the mirror of our existence outside of ourselves; thus, human beings are “climatic”, constantly apprehended in climate which they use to express themselves⁴. “*We have discovered ourselves in climate, and in this self-apprehension we are directed to our free creation.*”⁵

His theory is taken a step further, dividing the world into climatic areas, claiming that each civilization has developed specific features in direct relation with the

⁴ Cf. Tetsurō WATSUJI, *A Climate: A Philosophical Study*, Tokyo, Printing Bureau, Japanese Government, 1961 (orig. ed. *Fūdo*, 1935), ch 1.

⁵ WATSUJI, *Climate*...,cit., pp. 6.

climate of the corresponding area, thereby coming close to an approach that risk leading to deterministic conclusions.

Japan is placed in a unique position in the monsoon area,

Monsoon resignation also takes its own distinctive turn in Japan. First of all, it is both tropical and frigid. [...] Violent winds and deluge rains in the end enforce resignation on man, but their typhoon nature provokes in him a fighting mood. Thus, while the Japanese thought neither to submit passively to nor to resist nature, he did attain an ill-sustained acquiescence. ⁶

Watsuji in this way laid the ideological foundations for interpreting Japan as a society intrinsically in harmony with nature, while also falling into an inevitable cultural flattening. This emphasis on the country's uniqueness, in later contexts, will become intertwined with nationalist needs, in which the exaltation of the national territory corresponded to the construction of a strong Japanese cultural identity. ⁷

The influence of this vision was not limited domestically. In this regard, his book was translated on the occasion of the 9th session of UNESCO General Conference (New Delhi, 1956), within the "Major Project on Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values". The very fact that this volume, with all associated implications, was selected among others as in some way manifesting Japanese values in such a significant context, has inevitably also impacted the perception of Japan abroad.

The holistic view of the world that emerged from Watsuji's work, was later strengthened in broader ecological debates concerning the human–nature

⁶ WATSUJI, *Climate...*, cit., pp. 136.

⁷ See Richard REITAN, "Ecology and Japanese History: Reactionary Environmentalism's Troubled Relationship with the Past", *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 15, 3, 2017, pp. 1-25.

relation abroad, most notably in Lynn White Jr.'s *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (1967).

His essay constituted a second major milestone in the discussions on Japan's ecology. By attributing the environmental crisis to the coming of Christianity over Animism, which White argues altered the man-nature balance, he shifts the search for the causes of environmental degradation from a concrete level to that of value systems. This, in turn, opens up space for the rise of a West-East binary opposition, whereby the West is seen as dominating nature, while the East has a peer-like relation with it.⁸

However, it is important to highlight that White's claims are relatively shallow, as he does not address how animism might concretely contribute to environmental sustainability. Additionally, as Morris-Suzuki points out, it is not clear how Japan, despite hosting "*shinto* values" and being so near to the Confucianism homeland, had so rapidly integrated Western innovation at the expense of the environment.⁹

In the following years, Watsuji's and White's ideas have been reevaluated and received critical attention; nevertheless, they have consistently remained a strong theoretical backdrop for any dissertation on Japan's ecological potential.

Accordingly, while abroad these skeptical viewpoints also led to new attempts of interpreting the relationship with nature, in Japan they translated into a search for historical continuity between shinto and animism. Indeed, this religion is widely believed to have animistic roots dating back to the Jōmon

⁸ See Lynn Jr. WHITE, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", *Science*, 155, 3767, 1967, pp. 1203-1207.

⁹ Cf. Tessa MORRIS-SUZUKI, *Re-inventing Japan: Nation, Culture, Identity*, London-New York, Routledge, 2015 (1 ed. 1998), ch. 4, pp 36-37.

period—coming primarily from the veneration of nature—which were partially lost due to industrialization.¹⁰ A recovery of these ancient principles is then presented as the solution to environmental degradation:

砂漠の増大、森の死滅、チェルノブイリの事故、地球の温暖化、それらは確実に一つの方向を示しているように思われる。それは環境の破壊であり、生物、ひいては人類の滅亡である。[...]もう一度人類が、この文明の歴史の果てにアニミズムの信仰を取り戻さねばならないのではないか。¹¹

“The expansion of deserts, the degradation of forests, the Chernobyl disaster and global warming, they all seem to point inexorably in one direction. That direction is environmental destruction, the extinction of living organisms and, by extension, of humankind itself. [...] At the end of this civilization’s history, should not we all once again rediscover the faith of animism?”

These animistic values are not only attributed to shinto but are often extended to the Japanese people as a whole, who, through their alleged sensitivity to natural beauty, are seen as embodying traces of a lost shinto core. The persistence of cultural traditions such as *ikebana*, *hanami*, *tanka* poetry, seasonal festivals among others, has served to fuel this depiction. However, as Kalland and Kirby suggest, such practices go no further than expressing an aesthetic taste for a tamed nature or its idealized representation, without offering any real insight into actual ecological behavior.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Minoru SONODA, “Shinto and the Natural Environment”, in John Breen and Mark Teeuwen (eds.), *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*, Routledge, London-New York, 2000, pp. 32-46; and Takeshi UMEHARA, “Animism saikō” (Animism reconsidered), *Nihon Kenkyū: kokusai Nihon bunka kenkyū sentā kiyō*, 1, 1989, pp. 13-23.

梅原 猛, 「アニミズム再考」, 日本研究：国際日本文化研究センター紀要, 第1巻, 1989年, pp. 13-23.

¹¹ UMEHARA, *Animism...*, cit., pp. 22.

¹² Cf. Arne KALLAND, “Holism and Sustainability: Lessons from Japan”, *Worldviews*, 6, 2, 2002, pp. 145-158;

Particularly pertinent to this interaction is the aforementioned nationalist dimension of shinto. With the emergence and development of State Shinto (*kokka shintō*, 国家神道) particularly prior to the Second World War, this creed entered the public and moral sphere, undergoing a gradual process of secularization.¹³ What before was classified as religious practice became then tradition and cultural heritage. Accordingly, shinto's view of nature went through the same transformation.

As illustrated by Morris-Suzuki, it is precisely during this period that the notion of harmony with nature was also exalted in order to construct and assert a strong national identity in response to the Western threat.¹⁴

Critically, as noted by Reitan, it is possible to observe how this has taken the form of reactionary ecology, and is silently nourishing the contemporary desire to stabilize an ethnic community.¹⁵

わたしはかねてより、「神道」を「生態智」の「表現（あらわれ）」として捉え、[...]そしてそのような「生態智」が宿り、伝承されてきたのは、日本列島が[...]世界でも珍しいほど多様で多彩な変動的な自然環境を保持してきたことに基づいていることを指摘してきた。¹⁶

and Peter Wynn KIRBY, *Troubled Natures: Waste, Environment, Japan*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, ch. 4, pp. 69-70.

¹³ See more in ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, pp. 5-14; and ISOMAE, *The Conceptual...*;

¹⁴ MORRIS-SUZUKI, *Re-inventing...*, cit., ch. 3, pp. 35-38

¹⁵ See REITAN, *Ecology and Japan...*;

¹⁶ KAMATA, Tōji, "Shūkyōteki shintaichi to seitaichi no ikkōsatsu" (A Study of Religious Bodily Knowledge and Ecological Wisdom), *Shūkyō kenkyū*, 85, 2, 2011, pp. 429-456

鎌田 東二、「宗教的身体知と生態智の一考察」、*宗教研究*、第 85 卷 2 号、2011 年、pp. 429-456; cit. pp. 433-434; the translation below is mine.

"I have long perceived 'Shinto' as an 'expression' of 'ecological wisdom', [...] and I have pointed out that the reason such 'ecological wisdom' has taken root and has been passed down precisely in Japan is because its archipelago has [...] a natural environment unique in the world, preserving heterogeneous and vibrant natural features."

The excerpt from Kamata Tōji's article, clearly echoing Watsuji's *Climate*, is the perfect synthesis of the main critical aspects outlined hitherto, employing religion to elevate Japan's position, as the holder of unique territorial features. Despite making such strong statements regarding the connection with ecology, he does not provide within his essay any justification that goes beyond the symbolic level. It should be noted that these various scholars are no exception within an academic context, often referred to as *nihonjinron* studies, in which shinto is frequently discussed in these terms, but I will return to this concept later.¹⁷

As Reitan points out, this emphasis on Japan's ideal elements corresponds to an attempt to shift public attention away from the country's environmental condition and directing it toward its landscape, in order to conceal environmental damage or displace it elsewhere; besides the consolidation of identity, the causes are to be found primarily in the desire to maintain an advantageous socio-economic status quo.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the most revealing pieces of data supporting these hypotheses, concerns Japan's timber trade policy. While being one of the country with highest forest coverage of the world, Japan relies mostly on imported timber, with the aim of protecting domestic forests. As a matter of fact, according to Kagawa-Fox research, in 2005, Japanese timber industry's demand was approximately of 90 million m³, 80% of which was imported, contributing significantly to the degradation of the

¹⁷ See more about *nihonjinron* scholars in ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch. 3, pp 51- 63;

¹⁸ See REITAN, *Ecology and Japan...*, pp. 12-14.

woodlands of exporting countries.¹⁹ The shift in focus also occurs in more discreet ways than the physical displacement of the problem, as in this case. For example, it can be observed in the Whitean creation of a “model of alterity” against which the subject (Japan) define itself. It can also be traced in the interpretations that frame the introduction of an alien culture as the triggering cause of the environmental crisis of Japanese contemporary society.²⁰

At the same time, although everything presented up to this point does not seem to clearly reflect “ecology”, but rather appear closer to greenwashing, it is also necessary to acknowledge that shrines operate within a religious market. Since they do not receive any state funding, they must secure their own sources of income by attracting devotees and visitors. As result, the trope of nature can be exploited to increase the purchase of goods and ritual objects.²¹ This is particularly evident in the case of objects like *omamori*, *ema* and all the others charms mass-produced and sold in almost every medium-to-large-scale shrine. Ultimately, the economic praxis of shrines reinforces consumerism issues, reconfirming indeed that associating shinto with sustainability might lack a solid foundation.

1.2 Constructing Nature: Shinto Discourse in Institutional Communication

The debate over shinto’s role in the ecological crisis, is not confined to the academic sphere, reaching into religious institutions and popular discourse, where it is continually reshaped.

¹⁹ Midori KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics of Japan's Global Environmental Policy: The conflict between principles and practice*, London-New York, Routledge, 2012, ch. 6, pp. 162-163.

²⁰ Cf. REITAN, *Ecology and Japan...*;

²¹ Cf. KIRBY, *Troubled Natures...*, ch. 4, pp. 82-84; and ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch. 5 pp.97.

In this theoretical background of distorted constructions, the activities of Jinja honcho, also known as the Association of Shinto Shrines, acts as a strong vehicle for contemporary representations of “Japanese people’s” empathy with nature. The association was founded in 1946 during the Occupation period, with the purpose of preserving *shinto* traditions after its separation from the State by allied forces (Shinto Directive, 1945). It oversees the majority of shrines across Japan and acts as their administrative hub.²²

Over the last two decades, and particularly during Tanaka Tsunekiyo’s presidency, the global surge in environmentalism has influenced its narrative on shinto. Jinja honcho has become more and more explicit in aligning the religion with environmental ethics, drawing upon its core values of veneration, respect, and protection of nature. In his university lectures, Tanaka himself frequently emphasizes shinto’s coexistence with the natural environment, although his approach often remains largely rhetorical.²³

This trend is clearly reflected in the descriptions and visual contents on the official Jinja honcho website (see Fig.1).

²² JINJA HONCHO, *Jinja Honcho*, in “Jinja Honcho”, n.d., <https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/>, 10-01-2026.

²³ Cf. TANAKA, Tsunekiyo, *Shinto and Its Impacts on the Japanese View of Nature and Culture*, “Columbia University - Center on Japanese Economy and Business”, 2014, <https://cjeb.business.columbia.edu/22-02-26>.



Figure 1: Jinja Honcho website, homepage background (from Jinja Honcho website)

Even at a first glance, an observer is led to perceive a powerful bond between these two elements. This impression is confirmed by the website's descriptions—where terms such as “nature protection” and “harmony between humans and nature” are referred as core values of *shinto* teachings—and is significantly amplified by the authority of the source. Indeed, as the official voice of shinto shrines, the Jinja honcho's declarations carry a weight of institutional legitimacy that deeply influences the reader's perception. Another key point stressed on the website is the correspondence between *shinto* values and Japanese society's ones, ultimately fueling essentialist representations of the country:

神道の教えには、古代から培われてきた日本人の叡智や価値観が生きています。それは、「鎮守の杜(神社を囲むようにして存在する森のこと)に代表される自然を守り、自然と人間とがともに生きてゆくこと」²⁴

“The shinto's teaching embody the wisdom and values of the Japanese people, cultivated since ancient times. This teaching represents the ideas of ‘protecting nature (starting from the forests surrounding the shrines), and of ensuring the peaceful coexistence between nature and humankind’.”

²⁴ Cit. JINJA HONCHO, *What is Shinto?*, in “Jinja Honcho”, n.d., <https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/>, 10-01-2026; the translation below is mine.

The website is available in both Japanese and English and the main storytelling does not essentially differ between the two versions. However, once again, what they have perfectly in common is a complete lack of information on how this religion take concrete action on nature protection, either on how shinto can make a contribute to the world environmental needs.

It is worth noting also that the association, although being a non-state entity, keeps unofficial ties with politics. Actually, several figures in the Japanese political establishment, most notably the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, are affiliated with it, and the organization also has a political wing, the Shintō seiji renmei. Moreover, Tanaka Tsunekiyo, who has been the association's president since 2010, is closely linked to Nippon kaigi, a well-known conservative lobby in Japan.²⁵ This fact is extremely significant when placed within the context of reactionary ecology previously outlined. For example, the fusion of nationalist political ideologies with Shinto and nature conservation finds a clear expression in the May 2016 G7 summit at Ise jingu, where the location choice is far from coincidental.²⁶ In fact, Abe in his opening speech addressed two major themes: Japan's natural heritage and the spiritual magnificence of Ise.²⁷ By doing so, he tightened the intrinsic link between the country's natural landscape and its spiritual core, using the symbolic power of Ise shrine to subtly legitimize a specific national narrative. Yet, the Ise Shrine is no stranger to being at the heart of controversies.

²⁵ Cf. ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, pp. 3-5 and pp.131-135.

²⁶ See ROTS, *Shinto, Nature*, pp. 1-2.

²⁷ SHINZŌ Abe, *Japan's Action Plan for a Sustainable Future*, in "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan", 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/ms/is_s/page4e_000465.html, 12-01-2026.

THE CASE OF ISE SHIKINEN SENGU

The Ise Shrine is one of Japan's most important religious complexes. Beyond attracting tens of millions of annual visitors, it is regarded as the cradle of *shinto* tradition.²⁸ The main sanctuary (Naiku) enshrines Amaterasu-Omikami, one of the most ancient deities in *shinto* mythology and directly linked to the Imperial Family. As such, its symbolic power has, throughout history, made the shrine a recurring focal point for national and political debate. Given its spiritual significance, Ise jingu enjoys a special status within the Jinja honcho, remarked as its main shrine; notably, it is the only shrine to be featured with its own dedicated section on the organization's website.²⁹

The shrine's natural surroundings are equally noteworthy; its sacred forest (鎮守の森, *chinju no mori*) hold a considerable weight both as a tourist attraction and, more importantly, as a vast and biodiverse ecosystem.

神宮の森には杉や^{ひのき} 檜^{のき}といった針葉樹と、^{くすのき} 楠や榊などの広葉樹が混在し、さまざまな動植物が生息しています。確認されているだけでも宮域全体で動物約 2,800 種、鳥類約 140 種、植物約 850 種にのぼり、伊勢志摩地方の原風景ともいえる豊かな生態系が残されています。³⁰

²⁸ JINJA HONCHO, *Ise Jingu*, in “Jinja Honcho”, n.d., <https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/>, 10-01-2026

²⁹ Cf. *ibid*; and ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, pp. 1-5.

³⁰ Cit. JINGUSHICHO, *About Ise Jingu*, in “Ise Jingu”, 2015, <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/>; the translation below is mine.

“The sacred forest of Ise Jingu is home to various species of conifers, such as Japanese cedar and hinoki cypress, and broad-leaved trees, such as camphor and sakaki, and is inhabited by a great variety of flora and fauna. Based on confirmed records alone, the shrine entire grounds harbors approximately 2,800 species of animals, 140 species of birds and 850 species of plants, preserving a rich ecosystem that can be described as the unspoiled landscape of the Ise-Shima region.”

Yet, one might ask: How, then, does this idyllic portrayal relate to the broader 'pseudo-ecological' rhetoric of the Jinja honcho?

The shrine that symbolizes shinto thus becomes the emblem of one of the greatest rhetorical paradox regarding ecology through its main celebration, the Shikinen Sengu. This ritual involves the complete rebuilding of the shrine's two primary structures and fourteen subsidiary edifices, as well as the forging of new sacred treasures. Performed every two decades (the 63rd edition started in 2025 and is still ongoing), this practice serves as a manifestation of eternity via constant rebirth. The buildings are constructed entirely of wood, collected directly from sections of the shrine's own forests. When one considers that this ceremony has continued almost uninterrupted for over 1,300 years—and that the reconstruction is not necessitated by wear, but by ritual requirement—the environmental impact is immeasurable.

As if that were not enough, this practice is presented to the audience as a model of sustainability, by highlighting the preservation of handcraft tradition.³¹ However, as Rots criticizes, these very architectural techniques cause the premature aging of the wood, which in turn necessitates such frequent reconstruction.³²

³¹ See SONODA, *Shinto and...*, pp. 45; and JINGUSHICHO, *About Ise Jingu*, in “Ise Jingu”, 2015, <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/>, 10-01-2026.

³² See ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch.8, pp.186.

“Wood is central to Japanese civilization. The concepts of sustainability and reutilization, and the maintenance of know-how and skills, are considered more important than the actual physical existence of a structure or building.” ³³

Despite the fact that the old timber is redistributed to other shrines across the country, the reconstruction in 2013, as an example highlighted by Breen and Teeuwen, resulted in the felling and processing of 14,000 trees from the forest. Furthermore, a huge amount of gold, lacquer and silk was employed for the recreation of the treasures.³⁴

In light of these facts, the words of Ueda Kenji, another personality among the *nihonjiron* thinkers, resonate with a profound irony. He asserted that “Shinto rituals protect the natural environment as far as possible”. According to Ueda, it follows that Shinto believers naturally “love nature [...] and adopt an attitude of gratefulness towards it.” ³⁵

At last, such claims of sustainability lose their substance when measured against the reality of the Shikinen Sengu. The ritual represents then a symbol of not only the fragility of the pseudo-ecological veneer surrounding shinto, but

³³ PUBLIC AFFAIRS HEADQUARTERS FOR SHIKINEN SENGU, *Soul of Japan: An Introduction to Shinto and Ise*, in “Jinja Honcho”, 2013, <https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/publications/>, 10-01-2026, cit, pp. 48.

³⁴ John BREEN and Mark TEEUWEN, *A Social History of the Ise Shrines: Divine Capital*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp.3.

³⁵ Kenji UEDA, “Shinto’s View of the Human”, in James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2011, pp. 544-546, cit, pp. 544-545.

also of how shinto can at times be utilized to justify actions that cause significant environmental damage.³⁶

THE CASE OF TADASU NO MORI

Sacred shrine forests have long been of primary interest to *shinto* community, with particular commitment of the Association of Shinto Shrines to their preservation. As Ueda Masaaki suggests us, throughout history, these sites have come to be cherished not only as enduring green spaces within the city but also as hubs for social gathering and reconnecting with nature.³⁷

Alongside the forest of Ise jingu, another site of great ecological attention is the Tadasu no mori, located within Shimogamo jinja in Kyoto. Member of the Jinja honcho as well, the shrine is one of the most visited in Kyoto and hosts the popular Aoi matsuri. In 1994, both the shrine and its forest were designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites as part of the “Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto”, honoring their deep historical and cultural relevance.

The forest is also associated with a foundation the Tadasu no mori zaidan (糺の森財団), which since 1881 has been carrying out initiatives in research,

³⁶ ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch. 9, pp.189-195.

³⁷ Masaaki UEDA, “Mori to Nihonjin no kokoro: Shizen to ningen no kyōsei no ba, chinju no mori no saisei he” (Forests and Japanese spirit: toward the regeneration of shrine groves as a space for coexistence between nature and humans, *Culture, Energy and Life*, 95, 2011, pp. 3-8.

上田 正昭, 「森と日本人のこころ ― 自然と人間の共生の場、鎮守の森の再生へ」, *CEL*, 第 95 巻, 2011 年, pp. 3-8.

biodiversity protection, preservation and promotion of cultural traditions.³⁸ The foundation also counts some members of the clergy among its supporters, however it is not formally affiliated with the Jinja honcho and it sustains itself primarily through donations from its members.

However, the presence of this foundation could not stop commercial incentives from prevailing over territorial protection. In November 2015, the blog Green Shinto launched a petition to halt the sale of part of the *jinja*'s grounds for a luxury residential development. Although the project was situated outside the UNESCO perimeter, the excavations, reportedly, threatened the underlying aquifers, putting in danger the ecological integrity of the forest hearth as well.³⁹

Despite the growing concern from locals, the shrine's leadership justified this decision as a financial necessity for Shimogamo ritual reconstruction scheduled for that year, claiming that funds were insufficient. Yet, when the residents requested the disclosure of the shrine's financial situation or even the cancellation of the ritual ceremony to save the land, no answer was provided. This lack of transparency suggests that the reasons behind the project were to find, most likely, in profit rather than ritual preservation.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the opposition failed and luxury complex J. Gran The Honor was completed in April

³⁸ TADASU NO MORI FOUNDATION, *Tadasu no mori ni tsuite* (About Tadasu no Mori), in "Tadasu no Mori", 2019, <https://tadasunomori.or.jp/>, 10-01-26.

糺の森財団、「糺の森について」、糺の森、2019 年, <https://tadasunomori.or.jp/>, 10-01-26.

³⁹ See JOHN Dougill, *Save the Trees* (Shimogamo), in "Green Shinto", 2015, <http://www.greenshinto.com/wp/2015/11/18/save-the-trees-shimogamo/>, 25-01-2026; and JOHN Dougill, *Shimogamo Construction*, in "Green Shinto", 2015, <https://www.greenshinto.com/2015/03/09/shimogamo-construction/>, 25-01-2026.

⁴⁰ Cf. ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, pp.134-135.

2017. The official website now leverages the prestige of Tadasu no mori, citing its historical and ecological importance to enhance the property's appeal.⁴¹

This strategic use of natural environment is not an isolated phenomenon, nor is limited to the religious milieu; rather, it is part of a broader trend to approach Japanese society through its presumed inherent values, shaping people's perception also abroad.

In this regard, an analysis of the top 30 list of bestsellers concerning Japan on the websites of major international book chains, reveals a striking disproportion in the use of natural imagery between European and Japanese literature.

NATURE AS A MARKETING DEVICE: Visualizing Japan Through Book Covers

This short study, which I personally carried out, consist in a comparative analysis between the book covers of Japanese literature (and titles concerning Japan) and those of three European literatures: English, French, and Italian. The research focused on the top 30 bestsellers for each category across the websites of the major international book chains —specifically Mondadori, Feltrinelli, FNAC, Waterstones, and Amazon.com— over a three-month period, from April to June 2026 (the data from the selected websites were cross-checked three distinct intervals each month).⁴²

⁴¹ SOTHEY'S INTERNATIONAL REALITIES, *About*, in "J.GRAN THE HONOR Shimogamo Tadasu no Mori", n.d., <https://en-1762.site-translation.com/lp/shimogamo/>, 12-01-2026.

⁴² It should be noted that, due to methodological constraints and the inability to access the sales records of the various shops, the scope of this study is limited.

In the sections dedicated to Japan, natural elements appear on average in 45-55% of covers, compared to approximately 10% in other countries' literatures. Furthermore, nearly all books concerning *ikigai* or similar themes—generally focusing on lifestyle and spirituality—feature natural motifs. This might confirm a pondered use of a visual-thematic association with religion, or something akin to it, to boost the sales (indeed, a good amount of books within this genre were included in the rankings under consideration).

Additionally, it is noteworthy that in approximately 60% of the cases analyzed, the naturalistic cover appeared to clash with the actual content of the book. Even though shinto is not explicitly invoked, these data can be interpreted, partially, as a reflection of the shinto environmental paradigm's influence. Reasonably, this trend is also driven by a form of orientalism that utilizes nature as a marketing device.

In conclusion, one might object that few cases do not provide enough data to demonstrate a general trend, especially in relation with Jinja honcho's activities. However, it should be highlighted that the Ise and Shimogamo shrines, as previously mentioned, hold immense national and international significance for their history and traditions. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that the Association would monitor and encourage greener practices in minor shrines in a stricter way than it does in the analyzed ones. Indeed, the official website does not list any environmental guidelines that member shrines are required to follow. Nor does the organization exert full control over the practices of local priests, who, in most cases, lack specific environmental expertise and tend to prioritize administrative duties. As result, the environmental initiatives are frequently carried out by local groups and foundations —like Tadasu no mori zaidan— rather than the single shrines. These entities, operating with limited

means, mainly focus on the preservation of their surrounding areas, rarely engaging in more general issues of ecological concern.⁴³

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has clarified the dynamics through which shinto is being rebranded as a green religion. As outlined, both academic and popular discourses leverage shinto's animistic roots and its veneration of nature through *matsuri* and traditions such as ikebana. However, while these practices represent a merely symbolic admiration, they are portrayed as a distinct ecological sensitivity inherent to shinto and the Japanese people—as the only civilization in which such a belief system has flourished.

Contrasting with this facade, the examination of actual shrine practices brings to the surface numerous inconsistencies, demonstrating that such claims are rarely motivated by a genuine concern for Earth protection. Instead, a strategic use of nature emerges: on one hand, the appropriation of global sustainability trope has allowed shinto to reposition internationally; on the other, it serves as a tool to strengthen a nationalist agenda.⁴⁴

The problematic nature of these dynamics appear not only in the romanticized view of Japan held abroad—particularly among non-specialists—but also impacts the country itself. Indeed, as Kirby and Knight brilliantly emphasize, a relationship with nature mediated through its idealization blurs the perception of actual problems, diminishing the awareness that an increasingly urban

⁴³ Cf. ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch.7, pp. 148-149 and 153.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ugo DESSÌ, *The Global Repositioning of Japanese Religions: An Integrated Approach*, London-New York, Routledge, 2017, ch. 3, pp. 87-90.

population has toward polluted areas.⁴⁵ For these reasons, when discussing about environmentalism in Japan, its association with shinto becomes an unavoidable factor.

This analysis has also shown, however, that employing nature functionally can be effective in raising public interest, and that shinto's sacredness can be employed as a means to preserve specific areas—just as it can be used to exploit them.⁴⁶ Therefore, while local initiatives around shrines pursue specific campaigns, it is not impossible that these could serve as “opportunities to better inform the public about wider ecological implications”⁴⁷. Yet, this will only be possible by shifting the focus away from non-environmental interests and integrating concrete activities.

Given this framework, the next chapter will investigate environmental NGOs and NPOs activities within Japanese political and institutional structures, examining how and if they diverge from the narrative outlined thus far.

⁴⁵ Cf. KIRBY, *Troubled Natures...*, ch.4, pp. 82-83; and Catherine KNIGHT, “The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan”, *Environment and History*, 16, 3, 2010, pp. 349-370, pp. 552.

⁴⁶ Cf. ROTS, *Shinto, Nature...*, ch. 9, pp. 203-206.

⁴⁷ KNIGHT, *The Nature Conservation...*, pp. 353

CHAPTER 2 - Systemic Constraints in Civil Society: Between Policy-Making and Environmental Activism in Japan

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, it was emphasized how the public and academic debate on environmental issues has been intertwined with shinto's vision of nature for a long time. Reportedly, this had a strong influence on the perception of nature and environmental damage within Japanese society both domestically and internationally. This second chapter will shift the focus from a theoretical-religious perspective to an institutional one, seeking to demonstrate that the rhetoric-implementation gap is partially preserved also when looking at the Japanese environmental and NGO-related policy of the last decades.

Japan had a relatively slow development of environmental awareness and initiatives when compared to the United States and Europe. While these countries had already a quite extensive literature on the subject in the 19th century, Japan was still in its early stages. Indeed, the traditional admiration of nature was not translated into activism until around the beginning of the 20th century. As Knight points out, the Japanese approach to environmental issues tended to see humans rather than the environment as the victim.¹

Furthermore, as this chapter will try to clarify, the development of a solid environmental activism network to balance out the systemic deficiencies was largely hampered by institutional and social constraints.

In this context, it should be noted that Japan, right after the Second World War, concentrated its investments on the heavy industry sector, especially on the petrochemical one, despite the resulting pollution. Environment preservation was not therefore the priority of the government of the period, to the extent that

¹ KNIGHT, *The Nature Conservation...*, pp. 354

there was no dedicated line ministry. Indeed, until 1971 all issues related to the environment and climate change were mainly managed by the Ministry of Welfare and the Economic Planning Agency. As Kagawa-Fox illustrates, the first laws in the field of environmental policy were enacted due to the strong public pressure, triggered by the undeniable impact that industry had had on people's health at that point;² certainly, the outbreak of the four pollution *kōgai*³ had a crucial influence on these laws and on the institution of a dedicated agency in 1971.

The 1970s represented a watershed moment for Japanese environmental policy, with the *kōgai kokkai* Diet Session (公害国会, 1970) and the establishment of the Environmental Agency marking the moment when the government began to pay more attention to the ecological problems. Nevertheless, as I will point out in the next paragraph, the policy-making process would always be characterized by a powerful interference of economic and business interests.

Since its creation, the Environmental Agency (hereafter EA) had struggled to exert a relevant influence. The first factor contributing to its limited power is that this Agency was initially created *ad hoc* to face the severe backlash caused by the pollution-related illnesses. Therefore, it mostly included figures coming from other agencies, which had no expertise in the sector and prioritized the interests of their own agencies. Yet, the most influential factor was, the great power vested in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the *Nippon keidanren* during the decision-making process.

² Water Quality Conservation Law (1958), Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control (1967), Water Pollution Control Law (1970).

See KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, ch 2, pp. 46

³ The four major pollution-related diseases caused by the rapid industrialization of the 1950s. Respectively, Itai-itai disease (Toyama, c. 1912), Minamata disease (Kumamoto and Niigata, c. 1954 and 1960), and Yokkaichi asthma (Mie, c. 1959).

Cf. KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, ch 2

As a matter of fact, before the turn of the century, despite the growing concern about environmental problems, there was still a prevailing view in Japan that industry was the driving force behind the country and that, consequently, a balance had to be struck between environmental protection and economic interests. This often meant that, in the event of a conflict, the former was sacrificed in favour of the latter. In order to achieve this strategic balance, environmental policies were not developed solely by the EA; there was a tradition of interministerial consultation, although, in reality, this appeared more like interference disguised as “collaboration”.

MITI was the body in charge of economic and industrial policy, whose primary target was economic growth. Reportedly, it had also a leading role in environmental policy-making; the majority of the EA’s key positions were occupied by METI’s bureaucrats, who exploited their role to push through draft laws that were in their favour.⁴

The other force at play was the *Nippon keidanren*, the largest Japanese Business Federation in the country.⁵ Although not a political body in the strict sense, it was able to influence decisions. Indeed, it provides significant financial and political support to the parties and has close ties with the Ministry of Industry.

Corporate claims were put forward by the *Keidanren* and defended by the METI in the political arena, with consequent implications for environmental policy as well. It is noteworthy that all efforts were directed at controlling the effects of ecological damage rather than at understanding and diminishing its causes, and

⁴ See KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, ch 2, pp. 49-60.

⁵ According to its official website, as of 2025 the association has a membership amounting to 1,574 registered representative companies of Japan. Cf. KEIDANREN, *About KEIDANREN*, in “Keidanren Japan Business Federation”, 2025, <https://www.keidanren.or.jp/en/profile/pro001.html>, 30/05/2026.

that for a long time companies were allowed to self-regulate their emissions. To Kagawa-Fox's words, industries were more similar to the regulators than the regulated.⁶ Finally, industries were reluctant to adopt drastic measures to reduce their environmental impact, relying exclusively on technological solutions without considering alternative approaches.⁷

Another important element to bear in mind is that the postwar political panorama was dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This party was known to be tightly linked with the business community and this was reflected in its ruling approach.

Moreover, prior to the 1994 electoral reform, it was not uncommon for LDP politicians to secure votes in exchange for public works projects within a given district. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, this dynamic also partially applies to environmental movements through the phenomenon of "golden parachutes".⁸ The relentless pursuit of urbanization and the numerous public works undertaken during this period were the main causes of the serious environmental crisis that Japan faced in the years that followed.

This entrenched system of reciprocal exchanges among Japan's various economic and political actors made it difficult for the EA to exert a role that extended beyond a merely advisory capacity. For example, after its foundation the Agency proposed on several occasions stricter supervision of industries' activities and their energy plans, including sanctions for non-compliance.

⁶ KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, cit., ch 2, pp. 56.

⁷ See AKAHA Tsuneo, "Restructuring Environmental Policy in Japan: the 1990s and Beyond", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1, 2, 2001, pp. 121-159.

⁸ Cf. AKAHA, *Restructuring...*; and Michael C. DREILING, Nicholas LOUGEE, NAKAMURA Tomoyasu, "After the Meltdown: Explaining the Silence of Japanese Environmental Organizations on the Fukushima Nuclear Crisis", *Social Problems*, 64, 1, 2017, pp. 86-105.

However, these proposals met with opposition from MITI and the business community, and ultimately came to nothing; the drafting of energy plans remained at the discretion of companies and was kept confidential.⁹

2.1 Institutional Development and Economic Priorities in Japanese Environmental Policy

As outlined in this chapter's introduction, despite the establishment of the Environmental Agency marking a significant point in the perception of environmental urgency in Japan, it failed to become a key player in the policy-making process. As a matter of fact, the formalization of legislative proposals required final approval from the Economic Planning Agency, and the EA's headcount was composed mainly of other agencies' representatives, which made it particularly liable to pressure from specific sectors.

Certainly, it must be observed that since its foundation, a great number of laws relating to environmental protection and climate change have been enacted. According to Kagawa-Fox, between 1971 and 1989 twenty-one laws were published on this subject.¹⁰ However, this cannot be attributed solely to the presence of the agency: the state was facing significant domestic and international pressures which shaped its approach.

As mentioned in the previous section, pollution diseases (*kōgai*) represented a crucial factor in the creation of these policies. As a matter of fact, they became not only a glaring sign of the destructive effects of the postwar pollution, but also

⁹ Keegan COTHERN, HASEGAWA Junichi, "Precedent, Progress, and Missed Opportunities", *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 2023, 21, 9, pp. 1-20.

¹⁰ See KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, ch 2, pp. 46-48.

the symbol of the government's and businesses' neglectfulness. By persistently ignoring, or rather avoiding investigating adequately, the link between disease and pollution, the government had committed a severe breach of duty toward its citizens, thus requiring immediate remediation.

On the other hand, as international focus on planetary protection intensified, Japan's movements were increasingly subjected to global evaluation and criticism. Over the years Japan had gained a bad reputation abroad, as an unethical exploiter of other countries' natural resources. Indeed, in parallel with the major economic boom, the country expanded its overseas activities, particularly in East Asia. Japan thus began delocalizing its production facilities, effectively transferring polluting processes abroad. These strategic investments were often directed toward autocratic-leaning regimes, such as the Philippines, where local authorities readily granted permissions despite the severe environmental degradation. According to Avenell, one-quarter of these relocations involved the chemical and metallurgical industries, whose operations are highly polluting; the situation was further exacerbated by the tightening of Japanese regulations on radioactive materials, which led the nation to refocus its activities on Malaysia, where the regulatory framework was more flexible.¹¹ However, the issues concerning Japan extended far beyond industrial relocation. The intensive pursuit of practices like logging, ivory trade, and whaling increasingly framed the nation as an eco-predator on the global stage.

In this regard, the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the Kyoto Conference on Climate Change of 1997¹² had a decisive influence on the

¹¹ Cf. Simon AVENELL, "The Borderless Archipelago: Toward a Transnational History of Japanese Environmentalism", *Environment and History*, 19, 4, 2013, pp.397-425.

¹² Respectively, the Rio the Janeiro United States Conference on Environment and Development is one of the first global attempts to bring together both political and social actors to exchange views and develop collaborative strategies to tackle the growing global environmental crisis. Whereas, the Kyoto Conference (COP3), refers to the international summit where specific GHG emission reduction targets were settled for every member country.

international direction that Japan's environmental policy took in the last two decades of the 20th century. At this juncture, the concepts of "environmentalism and sustainability" became an important political tool for Japan, serving not only to rehabilitate the country's image but also to secure a more prominent position within the global arena.

It is no coincidence that during this period the Wildlife Division and a Biodiversity Policy Division were added to the EA (2000) and, finally, the Ministry of the Environment (hereafter MOE) was established in 2001 (in place of the Agency). However, its functions and weaknesses remained almost unchanged.

Therefore, while progress has undoubtedly been made regarding the country's environmental awareness, the proliferation of laws and funding for environmental NGOs during these years can also be interpreted as a strategic effort by the government to leverage ecological themes to gain international legitimacy, rather than as a reflection of an actual policy priority.¹³ If we complement this with Japan's rebranding attempts through specific *shinto* characteristics, discussed in the previous chapter, this arguably becomes the most plausible interpretation.

In any case, even within this renewed focus, the political line did not deviate significantly from the principle of balance and collaboration with big business. Japan started to provide various forms of Official Development Assistance (ODA)¹⁴ to developing countries in order to strengthen environmental protection. Nevertheless, the majority of these initiatives relied extensively on the utilization of technologies, thereby also representing a commercial opportunity for

¹³ DREILING, LOUGEE, NAKAMURA, *After the Meltdown...*, pp. 91-92.

¹⁴ It refers to the government program that provides various forms of support to help developing countries both to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to ensure a general landscape of peace and stability.

Japanese manufacturing companies. Reportedly, this approach was maintained regardless of whether it was concretely beneficial to the recipient country; indeed, such assistance often resulted in further complications rather than solutions for local communities.¹⁵

This emphasis on technology also characterized the country's domestic environmental strategy. As mentioned before, the EA and the MOE shared the same structural difficulties, first and foremost the interference from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI; the former MITI). It was widely believed that adapting green technology to the business world would bring benefits in terms of both pollution reduction and a competitive edge in the market. As a result, all other pathways toward sustainable goals were overlooked—with the exception of nuclear energy, to which I will return later.

This is particularly evident when examining the White Papers released annually by the MOE. Indeed, a comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2025 White Papers reveals a significant accent on the use of “environmental value” within the market. For example, the 2019 summary highlights how adapting to climate change can serve as a business opportunity through the development of new technologies and services.¹⁶ Similarly, the 2025 document underscores the role of product labelling systems (such as ISO standards)¹⁷, which simultaneously encourage green purchasing among consumers and elevate the image of manufacturing industries.¹⁸ While encouraging environmental goals under the

¹⁵ See KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, ch 3, pp. 83-87.

¹⁶ MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT Environmental Strategy Division Minister's Secretariat, *Annual Report on the Environment, the Sound Material-Cycle Society and Biodiversity in Japan 2019*, in “Ministry of the Environment”, 2019, <https://www.env.go.jp/en/index.html>, cit., pp. 14.

¹⁷ International Organization for Standardization. It establishes a system of symbols which certify the safety and low environmental impact of products.

¹⁸ MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT Environmental Strategy Division Minister's Secretariat, *Annual Report on the Environment, the Sound Material-Cycle Society and Biodiversity in Japan 2025*, in “Ministry of the Environment”, 2025, <https://www.env.go.jp/en/index.html>, cit., pp. 05-06.

pretext of economic benefits can be a feasible strategy, the dynamic shifts when, in the broader picture, the actual management and understanding of the ecological crisis appear to take a back seat.

In fact, while various targets are explicitly stated, they leave the practical implementation entirely unaddressed; on the contrary, one gets the impression that the management of these changes is left entirely to local communities. This is particularly true regarding sustainable development and regeneration in rural areas:

(Referring to the concept of circular economy) “**'self-reliant and decentralized society'** where each **local community resolves its own issues** by continuously creating enterprises (local SDGs enterprises) that utilize local resources sustainably to improve the environment, economy, and society, while making best use of its unique characteristics to network with other communities and help each other.”¹⁹

This “method” is supposed to act as a tool to address regional social, environmental, and economic issues, but it repeatedly stresses the necessity for communities to act autonomously, utilizing their own resources to generate value. Despite being described in a somewhat avant-gardist tone, this approach presents severe challenges for the management of both the natural environment and rural communities. Notably, as also highlighted by critical indices, there is a deep lack of communication between the central government and local authorities, which consequently remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels.²⁰ Clear testimony of this can be found, for example, in the Environmental Impact Assessment Law (1997). Following its enactment, environmental assessments

¹⁹ MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, *Annual Report on the Environment, the Sound Material-Cycle Society and Biodiversity in Japan 2025*, cit., pp. 16.
Emphasis are mine.

²⁰ GAJ (Green Alliance Japan), *Green Watch: A Civil Society Environmental White Paper 2021*, in “Green Rengo”, 2021, <https://greenrengo.jp/en>, cit., pp. 9-11.

became mandatory for every large-scale project; in practice, however, the law was applied exclusively to central government initiatives, excluding the prefectural level.²¹

Another critical point of attention is the rhetorical treatment of the environmental crisis itself, which is a major element of continuity between the two documents despite the years that separate them. There is a continual tendency to focus strictly on the economic good and bad of natural events, while bypassing their root causes. This omission becomes highly problematic when considering the ambitious goals Japan has set for itself—such as the Strategic Energy Plan approved in 2024, which aims for a 73% reduction in greenhouse emissions by 2040²²—contrasted with actual emissions data. In 2023, the largest share of indirect emissions originated from the industrial sector (34.3%).²³

These first impressions are further reinforced when compared with international benchmarks. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that Japan still relies excessively on fossil fuels and that the expansion of renewable energy is obstructed by overly complex bureaucratic procedures.²⁴ In addition, Japan was classified as “generally insufficient” by Climate Action Tracker of the year 2024.²⁵

²¹ KNIGHT, *The Nature Conservation...*, pp. 360-361.

²² MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, *Annual Report on the Environment, the Sound Material-Cycle Society and Biodiversity in Japan 2025*, cit., pp. 04.

²³ MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, *Annual Report on the Environment, the Sound Material-Cycle Society and Biodiversity in Japan 2025*, cit., pp. 27.

²⁴ OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys: Japan 2026 - Executive Summary*, in “OECD”, 2026, <https://www.oecd.org/en.html>.

²⁵ Climate Action Tracker, *Japan*, in “Climate Action Tracker”, 2024, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/japan/>.

Overall rating INSUFFICIENT			
Policies and action against modelled domestic pathways INSUFFICIENT < 3°C WORLD	NDC target against modelled domestic pathways INSUFFICIENT < 3°C WORLD	NDC target against fair share INSUFFICIENT < 3°C WORLD	Climate finance HIGHLY INSUFFICIENT
Net zero target	year 2050	comprehensiveness rated as POOR	Land use & forestry NOT SIGNIFICANT

Figure 2: Japan's Overall Rating from The Climate Action Tracker

Although a reduction in emissions has been recorded since 2013, it is not enough to align with the Paris Agreement.²⁶ Furthermore, it is stressed that Japan continues to prioritize economic growth over investment in decarbonization, and that its green transformation strategies lack concrete targets. In addition, the funding for this purpose is evaluated as highly insufficient, compounded by a lack of transparency in the planning and implementation of the stated objectives.

These flaws have been identified not only by international authorities but also by national environmental organizations such as Green Alliance, which denounces the over-dependency on coal-fired thermal power and nuclear power and the inadequate accountability.²⁷ In this context, environmental organizations are expected to become a bottom-up catalyst for change. Yet, as will be illustrated in the next section, Japanese civil society is highly fragmented into small-scale groups and is rarely capable of gaining a seat at the table. Thus,

²⁶ The Agreement sets the critical threshold at 1.5 °C, beyond which climate damage would be irreversible. Such limit is determined by calculating the difference between estimates of today's global average temperature and those for the pre-industrial period.

²⁷ GAJ, *Green Watch...*, pp. 08.

environmental policies continue to be formulated mainly by a small number of people in industry, government, and academia.²⁸

2.2 Legal and Institutional Constraints on Japanese Environmental NGOs and NPOs

According to a survey conducted by Green Alliance and the National Institute for Environmental Studies in 2020, only 25% of environmental organizations in Japan are able to advance policy recommendations, while the remaining 75% are devoted to practical contributions or awareness-raising activities.²⁹

Why do NGOs and NPOs in Japan exert such limited public influence, and why are they so fragmented and marginalized? I will attempt to address these questions in this section by unpacking the historical limitations of Japanese civil society. Certainly, as previously pointed out, the relatively recent development of literature on the subject, and the general difficulty of becoming actively involved in civic engagement for abstract causes partly help to contextualize these dynamics. However, the primary reasons lie within Japan's political and structural framework.

First of all, the rapid growth in the number of environmental organizations occurred especially after 1998. This expansion was driven by the aforementioned global call for awareness, but ran parallel to a partial easing of regulatory barriers for establishing such groups, notably through the new NPO Law enacted that same year.

Under the previous system, groups seeking legal approval as a Non-Governmental Organization or Non-Profit Organization, regardless of the specific field of activity, had to go through a complex path of bureaucratic procedures.

²⁸ GAJ, *Green Watch...*, cit., pp. 07.

²⁹ GAJ, *Green Watch...*, cit., pp. 26.

Following Article 34 of the Japanese Civil Code, non-for-profit groups seeking state recognition were required to qualify as a "public interest legal person" (PILP).

However, the core problem here lies in the absence of an official definition delineating what constituted "public interest"; indeed, the interpretation of such a concept was left entirely to the discretion (*saiyō*) of the competent ministry.³⁰ As a result, ministries selectively approved organizations that aligned with their agendas, and the phenomenon of golden parachutes (*amakudari*) frequently occurred: to preserve their legal status, organizations were often pressured to appoint retired ministerial officials to their executive boards, thereby securing them stable positions and salaries.³¹

This clientelistic framework was further intensified by the political landscape: until 1994, the LDP was the undisputed dominant party, and its policy-making process was heavily influenced by *zoku*³² within the Diet. These politicians, specialized in particular policy areas, maintained close relations with economic interest groups within their respective sectors. Through mutual support, groups aligned with the LDP secured approval far more easily.

In this already adverse panorama, environmental groups faced a double disadvantage: since their ecological activities inherently intersected with multiple areas of competence, obtaining recognition was much more difficult due to internal coordination issues.³³

³⁰ See Robert PEKKANEN *Japan's Dual Civil society: members without advocates*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 54.

³¹ Cf. DREILING, LOUGEE, NAKAMURA, *After the Meltdown...*, pp. 94.

³² The term refers to Diet members, particularly during LDP rule, who specialize in specific policy areas. Following their integration into the divisions of the Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC), these figures nurtured strong ties with sectoral interest groups, whose advantages they actively promoted at the legislative level.

³³ PEKKANEN, *Japan's Dual...*, pp. 52.

This legal status (*hōjinka*) was necessary not only to access state funding and tax exemptions, but, most importantly, to be recognized as a legal entity capable of holding rights and assuming obligations. Without it, an organization could not engage in essential practices such as signing contracts, renting office space, hiring staff, or pursuing collaborations with local governments.³⁴ Given the immense difficulty of gaining access, many organizations chose to renounce this status, continuing to operate informally with the inevitable side effect of having limited resources and staff. By contrast, the organizations that did manage to secure this status were subjected to state control and co-optation, which prevented them from acting as true game changers.

The new 1998 NPO Law partially solved this issue by introducing the "NPO legal person", within the PILP with broader definition. This new designation allowed organizations to obtain legal recognition via certification (*ninshō*). The prerequisites for getting this status were no longer left to the discretion of individual ministries; instead, they followed more objective criteria established by law. Reportedly, state agencies still exercised administrative guidance over the majority of applicants, yet their overall influence was significantly curtailed.³⁵ However, this legislative easing primarily benefited non-profit organizations. In contrast, non-governmental organizations operating as conventional associations (*shadan hōjin*) or foundations (*zaidan hōjin*) were still subjected to considerable membership and capital requirements, which small groups frequently failed to meet. This disparity explains why the former category is far more prevalent in Japan than the latter.

Finally, although the new law facilitated and incentivized group formation, many organizations still choose not to make use of this mechanism. This resistance can be explained from the fact that the resulting benefits fail to sufficiently

³⁴ PEKKANEN, *Japan's Dual...*, pp. 51.

³⁵ PEKKANEN, *Japan's Dual...*, pp. 55-56.

compensate for the disadvantages. For example, the established tax exemptions do not cover the consumption tax or other various local taxes. Furthermore, while government subsidies often constitute the largest single source of income for these non-profits, they come at the expense of their autonomy. Indeed, to get to these privileges, groups must commit to an exhausting regime of reporting duties, investigations, and continuous oversight.³⁶ Consequently, as Mason points out, Japan's leading environmental groups are far smaller and underfunded in comparison to their American counterparts.³⁷ For many of these independent organizations, it is simply not worth the trouble.

This institutional context also provides precious insights into the scope of the themes addressed by environmental groups. As a matter of fact, addressing more serious and broader issues needs greater expertise and more funding. Yet, rejecting state control allows these movements to focus only on local-scale activities, such as recycling and land protection, which require more modest resources. This is what Pekkanen calls a civil society characterized by “members without advocates”.³⁸

This is also the reason why, for example, environmental groups do not have a strong position on nuclear energy. Indeed, as Dreiling et al. highlight, increasingly complex environmental legislation requires a professionalized and salaried staff. Furthermore, since the government actively promotes nuclear power as the first alternative to coal, organizations with larger budgets are less likely to denounce, and equally, local groups are constrained by a lack of necessary means to protest.³⁹

³⁶ See PEKKANEN, *Japan's Dual...*, pp. 64-71.

³⁷ Robert MASON J, “Whither Japan's Environmental Movement? An Assessment of Problems and Prospects at the National Level”, *Pacific Affairs*, 72, 2, 1999, cit., pp. 195.

³⁸ PEKKANEN, *Japan's Dual...*, cit., pp. 3.

³⁹ Cf. DREILING, LOUGEE, NAKAMURA, *After the Meltdown...*;

In any case, this does not imply that NGOs and NPOs have no way to voice dissent at all. As Mason points out, one of the most powerful tools at their disposal is *gaiatsu*, that is the ability to exert indirect pressure on the government through international networks.⁴⁰ Since Japan is particularly concerned with its global reputation, it is highly susceptible to this type of approach.

Alternatively, several organizations have successfully driven protests by cooperating with local residents and governments, although this collaboration, as will be illustrated in the following paragraphs, often requires specific favorable conditions.

Transnational Activism and Japanese Environmental Groups Abroad: THE U-TAN CASE

The end of the 1970s saw a gradual decrease in protests against pollution in Japan. While this is frequently interpreted as a general fading of interest linked to the stabilization of emission levels during that period, Avenell suggests that Japanese activism took on a new life overseas.⁴¹

As a matter of fact, during the 1980s, in parallel with the forest degradation caused by Japan, numerous indigenous protests began to arise. These were soon joined by Japanese movements as well, most notably Jishu Kōza (1970), JATAN (1987) and the Sarawak Campaign Committee (SCC, 1990). The core mission of these and various other organizations was to raise public awareness about pollution, starting from the Japanese experience, as well as to actively support the conservation of Southeast Asian tropical forests. Among these, the present study examines the case of U-TAN.

⁴⁰ MASON J, Whither Japan's..., pp. 201-202.

⁴¹ AVENELL, The Borderless..., pp. 401-405.

This group was founded, like so many others of its kind, starting from members of a small citizen organization, the Kansai Citizens' Alliance (関西市民連合, *kansai shimin rengō*) in the year 1988. This organization gradually began to carry out activities related to forest protection. Its long-standing members witnessed firsthand the harmful effects of Japanese deforestation during field explorations and, in the wake of indigenous protests, expanded their focus abroad.⁴²

Alongside JATAN, they launched an outright awareness and advocacy campaign, initially demanding the trading companies involved to halt logging operations. Having been frequently dismissed by these corporations, they decided to extend their claims to local governments; by the 1990s, the campaign had spread nationwide. In the 2000s, the scope of the organization's activities expanded once again following Telapak Indonesia's exposure of illegal Ramin timber logging in Indonesia.

Indeed, U-TAN, together with a coalition of other NGOs, led off several investigative operations regarding the origin and consumption of this specific timber. What made a significant difference in this campaign —beyond the involvement of various national and international groups— was the active involvement of small businesses, retailers, and public institutions, such as schools, that handled this material. The organization sought to encourage these small-scale actors to boycott Ramin, given its heavy ethical and environmental cost, and to adopt alternative materials like bamboo. Reportedly, by 2007, out

⁴² For an account of this case, see SAGARA Miho, "Aru shinrin NGO no 20 nen no kiseki - sono setsuritsu, katsudō no imi -" (A Twenty-Year History of a Forest NGO in Japan), *Journal of Forest Economics*, 55, 1, 2009, pp. 65-74

相楽美穂、「ある森林 NGO の 20 年の軌跡— その設立, 活動の意味—」、林業経済研究、第 55 巻 1 号、2009 年、pp. 65-74

of 850 companies dealing in Ramin, 501 had officially declared that they had ceased its usage.⁴³

The case of U-TAN demonstrates how even small grassroots organizations can make the difference in the fight against environmental problems. Through collaboration with transnational advocacy networks, local groups can strengthen their claims and achieve a positive impact both in the target country and domestically.⁴⁴ This case is, thus, a good example of how it is possible to effectively influence the behavior of Japanese economic actors by the means of the aforementioned *gaiatsu*.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that this series of initiatives achieved a fair degree of success partly due to a favorable socio-political context. First, these protests coincided chronologically with Japan's growing focus on environmental issues, driven by global trends on the subject. Second, the subsequent engagement of well-established international organizations, such as the WWF and Friends of the Earth (FoE), assured greater visibility to the cause and sustained public attention.

Finally, because local retailers and municipalities proved to be relatively open to change, it is worth asking whether such a small association could have made such a concrete difference if its interests had directly conflicted with the corporate's and the state's agenda. The following case study will attempt to address this final implication.

⁴³ SAGARA, *Aru shinrin NGO...*, cit., pp. 72.

⁴⁴ Cf. AVENELL, *The Borderless...*;

THE ISAHAYA CASE: Institutional Power and the Limits of Environmental Groups

The case of the Isahaya Bay Reclamation Project is one of the best examples of the Japanese historical preference for economic growth at the expense of the environment, and of how little environmental movements can actually achieve once a decision has already been made.

The Isahaya Bay is an expanse of around 3,000 hectare of muddy land located on the Ariake Sea coastline, in Nagasaki Prefecture. Reportedly, it is one of the most important bays of the whole of Japan, both in terms of productivity and biodiversity, which has earned it the name of “Womb of the Ariake Sea”; this site, in fact, represents the perfect habitat for mudskippers and various types of unique crabs and is also a key stopover for numerous migratory birds.⁴⁵

Despite its deep ecological significance, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), together with the Ministry of Construction, promoted an ambitious project to reclaim the bay, starting in the 1950s.

When the project received the approval from Nagasaki municipality, fishermen’s cooperatives also began to organize initial protests to make their voices heard.

According to the account provided by JAWAN (Japan Wetlands Action Network), one of the main organizations involved in the protest, a local opposition committee staged a protest involving 400 fishing boats at sea in 1965; in the years that followed, the discontent over the project also spread to other prefectures.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Goldman Environmental Prize, *Hirofumi Yamashita*, in “Goldman Environmental Prize”, 2022 <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/hirofumi-yamashita/>, cit.

⁴⁶ JAWAN (Japan Wetlands Action Network), *The Isahaya*, in “JAWAN”, 2008, <https://www.jawan.jp/e/news/081015isahaya2.html>, cit.

This attempt at opposition was, however, easily silenced by the government, which offered huge compensation to the fishermen in return for their consent. In this first phase, the local fishing community was not fully aware of the environmental damage that this project would entail, thus, whether out of financial self-interest or a lack of awareness, they ultimately chose to accept the compensation.

Nonetheless, various protests continued over the following years, and indeed decades. Most notably, Yamashita Hirofumi's (1934-2000) efforts played an essential part in bringing this case to public attention. As a matter of fact, in 1973 he succeeded in gathering local fishermen and farmers under the Association to Protect the Natural Environment of Isahaya, which managed to have the project temporarily suspended. His initiatives culminated with the creation of the JAWAN network in 1992, which went on to play an active role by conducting research to demonstrate the bay's environmental significance and expose shortcomings in the management of the government plan.⁴⁷ Yet, Yamashita only managed to scale back the project, but not to stop it.

The project was launched in 1986, and within a few years, large numbers of mollusks began to die; furthermore, the wetland environment was severely compromised by the construction of the dam. As environmental degradation escalated, directly impacting local industries such as *nori* seaweed harvesting and fisheries, the MAFF reorganized the project reducing the total area designated for reclamation. However, by the time the dam was completed in 1997, the ecosystem had already been destroyed; indeed, numerous steel slabs had been dropped into the sea, hence, holding back the tides, an essential source of life for the wetlands. The matter was eventually brought to court (Saga, 2004) but gained poor results, given the legal impossibility of recognizing fauna

⁴⁷ See Goldman Environmental Prize, *Hirofumi...*;

as a "plaintiff" in the case, alongside the difficulty of proving a direct causal relationship between the environmental damage and the construction project.⁴⁸

What is striking about this case is the stubborn persistence of the ministries involved, which pushed the project forward at all costs, even when it was no longer justified by any actual territorial necessity. Indeed, the project redefined its objective three times throughout its history. It was initially promoted as an initiative to increase rice production. However, the 1970s witnessed a drastic decline in the exploitation of this agricultural system; consequently, the project was redesigned to create highly productive farmland. Following a subsequent drop in demand for the latter as well, the ministry finally decided to reclassify the project as a flood-prevention measure. The city's mayor himself, who was reportedly in favor of the project, declared himself to be confused about how these newly reclaimed spaces would actually be utilized for.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the events regarding the Environmental Impact Assessment reveal once more the structural weakness and marginal influence of the EA (and later the MOE) within the decision-making process, which was unable to outdo ministries with large budgets and resources. Indeed, according to JAWAN's reports, the investigations commissioned by the MAFF were conducted superficially and with a significant lack of transparency by unqualified, politically compromised staff.⁵⁰ Moreover, the EA initiated its territorial analysis only after

⁴⁸ For an overview of the progress of the legal proceedings, see RYOICHI Hori, *Recent Events Relating to the Isahaya Land Reclamation Project (Nagasaki, Japan)*, in "JAWAN ", 2004, <https://www.jawan.jp/e/news/040725ariake-hori.html>; and JAWAN (Japan Wetlands Action Network), *Isahaya Reclamation Project — Why It Still Matters*, in "JAWAN", 2008, <https://www.jawan.jp/e/news/081015isahaya2.html>; and JAWAN, *The Isahaya...*;

⁴⁹ JAWAN, *The Isahaya...*, cit.

⁵⁰ See JAWAN, *The Isahaya...*; and Goldman Environmental Prize, *Hirofumi...*;

the project's definitive approval, and just a year before the construction works began.

Another noteworthy factor in the opposition's failure was the role played by media coverage. Ohkura underscores that newspapers engaged with the issue only when the disaster had become undeniable, and even then, they maintained a relatively passive reporting approach.⁵¹ The evolution of the situation was narrated without any critical or scientific detailed study, limited to a mere exposition of facts. Furthermore, local newspapers tended to reject or censor publications originating from opposition groups.⁵²

The Isahaya case validates the inference previously made regarding the U-TAN case: advocacy groups must find a favorable political and institutional landscape to succeed. When interests directly conflict, NGOs and NPOs are left with no room for maneuver. This is true even in the presence of international support. Indeed, the situation in Isahaya had drawn the concern of the Ramsar Convention ⁵³, which Japan had joined during those very years (1980), and which repeatedly criticized the government's decision and urged it to reassess the plan.

This stands as just one of many cases where organizations have failed to defend their claims and act as heralds for the rights of the ecosystems they seek to protect. Similar cases have been documented, for example, in Kagoshima, with reference to the construction of the Mageshima airport, and in Yokohama,

⁵¹ OHKURA Yoshiko, "The roles and limitations of newspapers in environmental reporting. Case study: Isahaya Bay land reclamation project issue", *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 47, 2003, pp. 237–245.

⁵² OHKURA, *The roles and limitations...*, cit. pp. 242.

⁵³ This is the global intergovernmental treaty on environmental conservation and protection of "wetlands" (such as marshes, peat bogs, tidal, muddy lands etc.), and it promotes their sustainable use.

with the reclamation of the Kitagawa wetland.⁵⁴ This proves that when the central government hardens its stance, there is little that local actors can do, particularly in peripheral areas characterized by weaker advocacy networks.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored how structural and political dynamics have prevented Japanese NGOs and NPOs from consolidating into a solid civil society. On the one hand, these associations are often controlled and exploited by the government as regional extensions of the state apparatus; on the other, they are largely excluded from the formulation of environmental policies.

While the situation has shown signs of improvement in recent years, with Japan demonstrating growing awareness of the global crisis, structural deficiencies still remain, as evidenced by international standard indexes. Furthermore, following the two major earthquake catastrophes —respectively, the 1995 Kobe earthquake and the 2011 Tohoku triple disaster— the vital importance of voluntary organizations is finally emerging with clarity.

In any case, Japan would significantly benefit from a transparent, egalitarian partnership with these organizations. In this way, the formulation of more informed policies that account for regional resources and local needs would become a concrete possibility.

⁵⁴ In these cases as well the environmental organizations were unable to pursue the lawsuit by invoking the “rights of the natural environment”. For further details on these legal actions, see FUTAMI Eriko, “Kankyō hogo dantai to seisaku keisei soshō - minji soshō ni chūmoku shite” (Environmental Groups and Policy-Making Litigation: Focusing on Civil Injunction Suits), *Kankyō Jōhō Kagaku*, 52, 1, 2023, pp. 6-10 二見絵里子、「環境保護団体と政策形成訴訟—民事訴訟に注目して」、環境情報科学、第 52 巻 1 号、2023 年、pp.6-10.

In this regard, the final chapter proposes a brief analysis of nature-based tourism as a sustainable strategy intersecting the two domestic necessities highlighted in this section: generating economic revenues while protecting and promoting Japan's natural environment.

CH 3: Sustainable Tourism and Regional Revitalization in Japan: Between State Interests and Local Initiative

INTRODUCTION

While Japan is commonly viewed as one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, with cities like Tokyo and Kyoto attracting visitors throughout the year, this exponential growth in tourist flows is a recent trend, as is its strategic use by the government as a tool to foster the economic development of the country. Arrivals have expanded steadily especially since the early decades of the 21st century (with a significant slowdown occurring only during the COVID-19 pandemic), reaching the extreme levels we witness today, culminating in overtourism.

This phenomenon does not only concern the high density of visitors in a given area, but it also encompasses the challenges it poses for the natural environment, local community, and for the tourists themselves, notably in terms of a decline in the quality of their experience. Indeed, in recent years the rate of international inflows has seen a relevant increase (for example, 19% between 2010 and 2019), compared with the global average (approximately 5%, over the same period).¹

Nevertheless, the majority of visitors tend to gather in the major urban centers, such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, which are the most affected by the repercussions of congestion.²

One of the most emblematic examples of these critical outcomes is Kyoto, where the local population is in a continuous fight against rising rents, overcrowded public transport, and inadequate waste management resulting

¹ ASAHI Sachiyo, *Econometric Analysis of Regional Economy*, Singapore, Springer, 2024, cit., ch. 3, pp. 108-109, 115.

² JAPAN TOURISM AGENCY, *White Paper on Tourism in Japan: 2024 (Summary)*, in "Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism – Japan Tourism Agency", 2024, <https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/en/siryou/whitepaper.html>, cit., pp. 13

from the huge concentration of people within the city's limits. This has led to a shift in attitudes toward tourism, as well as to inducing residents to move away, due to a cost of living that has now become prohibitive.³

The only exceptions to this inclination towards metropolitan areas are found in destinations including Hokkaido, Aichi, Okinawa, Kanagawa and cities like Fukuoka, Nara, which have been gaining popularity in recent years. Yet, rural prefectures still remain largely overlooked, with visitor rates close to 1%.⁴

2025 Visit Rate Ranking by Prefecture (Overall • Overall)

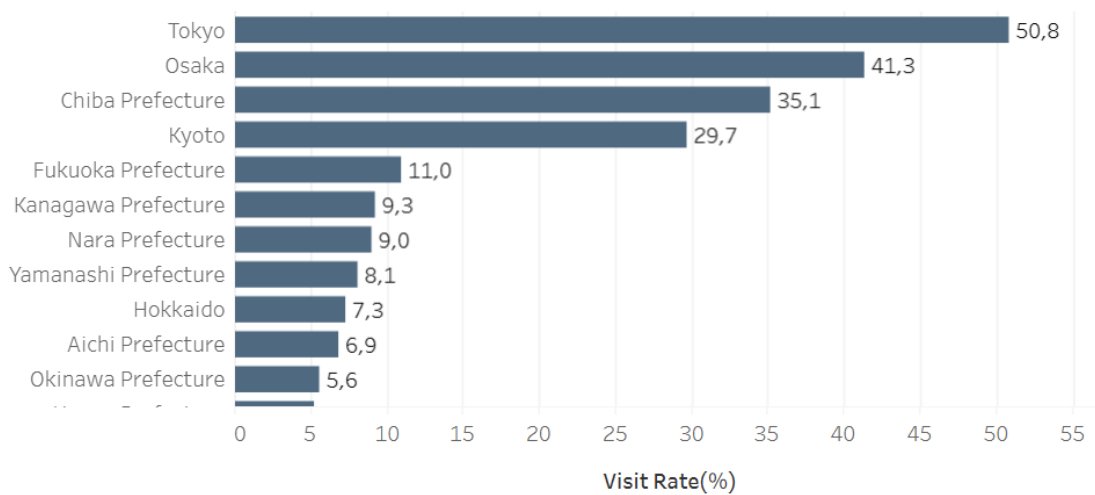


Figure 3: Foreign visitors in 2025 by prefecture from Japan National Tourism Organization website

Given the government's interest in regional revitalization through the creation of a circular economy based on community “self-reliance”, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this chapter examines how tourism fits into this equation. It will address how tourism can become a means to attract revenue while

³ Cf. Cassie BURTIS, Nicholas WISE, “Viewpoint: The overtourism strain on Kyoto: Economic policies and community impacts”, *Local Economy*, 39, 5-6, 2024, pp. 283-288.

⁴ See JNTO (Japan National Tourism Organization), *Visit Rate Ranking by Prefecture*, in “Japan Tourism Statistics”, 2026, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--inbound--prefecture--ranking>.

simultaneously supporting the conservation of local landscape, thereby partially compensating for the shortcomings of the central government. In particular, this brief study will take into account some cases that, despite few critical aspects, implement a sustainable model regarded to be largely exemplary. These cases demonstrate how the enhancement of regional resources can generate added value for local communities in economic, cultural, and environmental terms.

3.1 The Commodification of Nature and the Evolution of Japanese Tourism

The interference of economic and business dynamics in environmental policy comes to light also when looking at sustainable tourism management, where environmental resources often take a backseat even though they should represent the focal point. This scenario is rooted in a conception of nature that took shape long before the contemporary tourism boom. As will be illustrated in the following paragraphs, the State's attempt to leverage nature-based travel to strengthen nationalist ideas during the pre- and post-war period helped shape an objectified view of nature, which still hinders the recognition of the environment as a resource to be protected rather than exploited to this day.

As indicated earlier, the promotion of Japan in an international tourism perspective is a path the country has only recently embarked upon. Indeed, until around the 1970s, this sector was mainly sustained by domestic travelers (Figure 4).

The very concept of leisure tourism is relatively new in Japan; during the Meiji era, most excursions had religious and spiritual purposes, in the form of pilgrimages to major spiritual centres, such as the Ise Shrine.

Since these places of worship are traditionally nestled within a natural environment, like mountains and forests, a visit also represents an opportunity for direct contact with the landscape. Leveraging this connection, the government began to actively encourage pilgrimages to reinforce nationalist

ideals of territorial glorification.⁵ As discussed in Chapter 1, this association also found theoretical support among intellectuals like Watsuji, contributing to shaping a view of nature that was always subservient to other ends.

This nature-driven nationalist campaign did not cease after the defeat in World War II; despite the American Occupation, it merely shifted its purpose: it was no longer in service of colonial expansion, but rather it became a defense mechanism against Westernization, a tool for nation-building, and an attempt to renegotiate Japan's position in the new world order. Consequently, during this period traveling was redefined as a pursuit of the spirit of a so-called “old Japan” that was believed to have been lost, riding on the nostalgic sentiment of a changing era.

In this context, rural communities—which were once marginalized by rapid urbanization—began to be rediscovered as destinations that embody this sentiment, under the term “*furusato*” (old villages). Here again, the contact with nature was not pure, but rather it was mediated to serve specific ideological agendas.⁶ This rediscovery also led, in line with the growth of capitalism, to the use of the nature trope to push consumption. As Kirby argues:

*“The rarer it is, the more special it is. And the more prized transient nature becomes, the more aggressively it is consumed, with some of this mass consumption marring the natural-cultural sites in question. This, coupled with a Japanese predilection for certain highly culturally mediated natural forms [...] seemed to diminish identification with specific “wild” sites outside their homes and furusato that development or pollution could corrupt or sometimes already had corrupted.”*⁷

⁵ Cf. TAKEUCHI Keiichi, “Some Remarks on the Geography of Tourism in Japan”, *GeoJournal*, 9, 1, 1984, pp. 85-90; and Thomas JONAS, “A life cycle analysis of nature-based tourism policy in Japan”, *Contemporary Japan*, 24, 2012, pp. 183.

⁶ Cf. Wolfgang Georg ARLT, “Thinking through Tourism in Japan”, *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, 3, 3, 2006, pp. 199-207.

⁷ KIRBY, *Troubled Natures...*, cit., ch. 4, pp. 84.

This process further conditioned citizens to treat nature as an object to be exploited, rather than as a subject to relate to. Furthermore, Arlt notes that the limited presence of international visitors during this era was arguably due to the fact that this model of tourism was built on the search for a sense of “Japaneseness”, and was therefore not conceived for a foreign audience.⁸

Trends in the Visitor Arrivals to Japan by Year

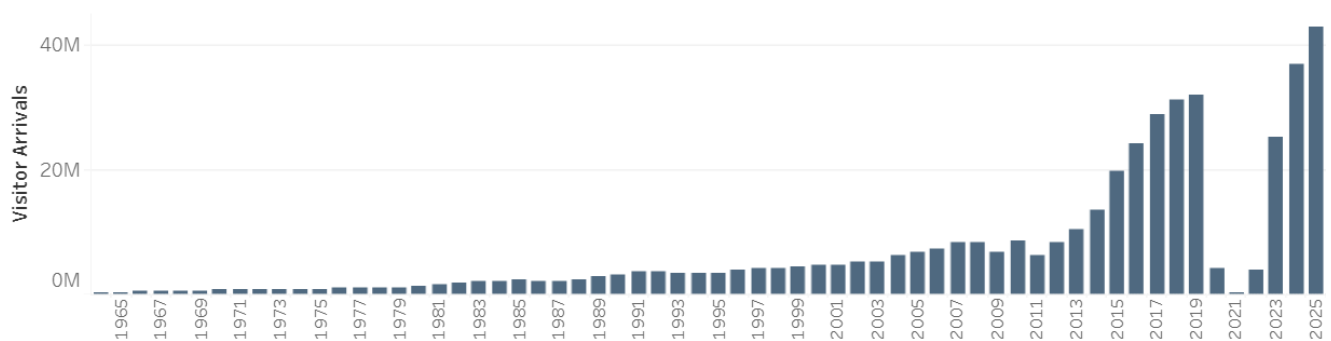


Figure 4: International arrivals in Japan from Japan National Tourism Organization website

Another point worth noting is that, taking into consideration the Japanese working culture of the economic bubble era, the boundaries between business and recreational activities were frequently blurred. Companies began to finance the construction of leisure facilities, such as golf courses and ski resorts, enjoying the favor of the LDP and ministries like MITI, which, as discussed above, adhered to the political line of “economy first”, even at the expense of the environment.⁹ This triggered a series of large-scale construction projects, which culminated in the enactment of the Resort Law in 1987. This law was an attempt to formalize the public-private partnership by envisaging the designation of at least 20% of the country's land for the construction of recreational facilities, with the aim of stimulating the tourism sector;¹⁰ needless to say, only big

⁸ ARLT, *Thinking through...*, cit., pp. 204.

⁹ Cf. Thomas JONAS, “A life cycle analysis of nature-based tourism policy in Japan”, *Contemporary Japan*, 24, 2012, pp. 188-190.

¹⁰ ARLT, *Thinking through...*, cit., pp. 202.

businesses benefited from it. Moreover, the law proved to be a massive failure, not only from an economic perspective but also, and above all, from an environmental one. According to a report in *The Japan Times*, the government had overestimated demand during the 1980s, making investments that were as massive as they were futile, with only 24% of the planned facilities actually being completed.¹¹ Yet, these policies are nothing new; they are, in fact, part of the system of public works and vested interests that extended far beyond the tourism sector and which led, amongst other things, to the destruction of Isahaya Bay.

The attempt to boost regional economies through the construction of infrastructure and resorts thus had the opposite effect: the centralized management, which did not take regional needs into account, led to the concreting over of even protected natural areas, as exemplified by the case of Tadasu no Mori, discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, the excessive commercialization of the countryside paradoxically contributed to take power away from rural regions. Indeed, as Jonas sharply points out, with the rising competition among *furusato* destinations—which were increasing in number during those years—these areas gradually lost their identity and were no longer capable of attracting public interest on their own. Facing a shortage of financial resources then, regional communities found themselves forced to rely on centralized travel agencies which, being focused on the low-cost package tour business, offset the decline in visitor numbers but also intensified competition between destinations, without bringing any significant benefits to local communities.¹² This series of dynamics further contributed to the commodification of nature. Even if following decades saw attempts to transition

¹¹ ANON., "Government overspent in resort development", in *The Japan Times*, 2002, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2002/11/20/national/government-overspent-in-resort-development/>.

¹² See JONAS, *A life cycle...*, pp. 189-191.

toward a greener economy, the influence of these ideas—which had by then become naturalized—remained evident.

As international visitor numbers increased in the early 2000s, the government recognized tourism's potential as a driver of national growth and the need for a more strategic management plan that could also address the environmental challenges of the new century. To this end, the Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Law came into force in 2007, and the following year a dedicated body, the Japan Tourism Agency, was established. Through these measures, the government officially announced its commitment to promoting sustainable tourism, presenting it as a force capable of revitalizing local economies and creating new job opportunities.¹³

The analysis presented thus far is not intended as a mere historical reconstruction; rather, it serves as the key to understanding the challenges that sustainable tourism faces to this day. The historical factors examined here—specifically, the objectified view of nature and the tendency to manage the territory based on centralized economic interests—have left a legacy that remains difficult to eradicate and that continues to be reflected in recent policy-making.

In this regard, a review of the latest tourism white paper reveals extensive reference to the promotion of rural areas through, for example, investment in high-value-added experiential contents, and the construction of luxury accommodation;¹⁴ however, little attention is paid to the sustainable use of resources, demonstrating once again that the concept of sustainable development has been conflated with that of sustainable growth.¹⁵

¹³ JAPAN TOURISM AGENCY, *Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Law*, in "Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism – Japan Tourism Agency", 2024, <https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/en/kankorikkoku/kihonhou.html>.

¹⁴ Cf. JAPAN TOURISM AGENCY, *White Paper...*, pp. 15-20.

¹⁵ KAGAWA-FOX, *The Ethics...*, cit., ch 3, pp. 86-87.

3.2 Ecotourism as an Alternative Path: Prospects and Barriers

Within this framework, ecotourism is gaining ground as an alternative to the *furusato* model. Ecotourism does not simply involve visiting spots renowned for their scenic beauty; rather, it is a term that designates a specific approach based on the safeguard of local environment and communities. Indeed, natural and regional resources are drawn upon within a cross-sectoral perspective, which balance environmental, social, and economic goals. Minimizing the socio-environmental impact of tourism, providing ecological education to visitors, and encouraging the active participation of the local communities are the cornerstones of this philosophy.¹⁶

However, as Jonas critically observes, this branch does not yet possess the capacity to transform the tourism industry, most notably due to low market penetration and the aforementioned structural barriers, such as the historical dominance of centralized travel agencies that channel tourism toward specific destinations, and the migration of power and labor force toward urban areas.¹⁷ To these must be added the constraints of civil society detailed in the previous chapter, since most tourism initiatives in this direction are carried out by local associations and groups operating with limited resources.

That being said, the growing interest in nature sightseeing¹⁸ and the considerable influence of international recognition networks like UNESCO,

¹⁶ JONAS, *A life cycle...*, cit., pp. 198-201.

¹⁷ See JONAS, *A life cycle...*, pp. 200.

¹⁸ According to JNTO statistics, nature sightseeing was one of the reasons for the trip for 68% of visitors in 2025. JNTO, (Japan National Tourism Organization), *Expectations Regarding Visit to Japan*, in “Japan Tourism Statistics”, 2026, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--expectations--regarding--visit--to--japan>.

suggest that ecotourism could become an effective tool for regional revitalization and for raising awareness of a more equal relationship with nature.

The following section therefore presents the analysis of two emblematic case studies, whose characteristics well illustrate both the potential and the challenges that this emerging form of tourism faces.

THE SHIRAKAWA-GO CASE: Community Governance Between Heritage Recognition and Mass Tourism

The UNESCO village of Shirakawa-go is an excellent example of how a destination can be revitalized through World Heritage recognition combined with constant community commitment. This synergy successfully enhanced a previously overlooked area, opening new possibilities for a community on the verge of disappearance.

Rural villages across Japan face severe decline in the 21st century due to shrinking populations, low birth rates, and the inability of traditional industries, such as agriculture and forestry, to sustain local economies alone. To prevent their complete abandonment, these communities must complement traditional production activities with alternative initiatives: tourism can represent one of the most promising avenues.

Shirakawa-go is a small municipality located in a mountainous area of Gifu Prefecture with a population of approximately 1,600 residents. In 1995, its inner village Ogimachi was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in recognition of its ancient settlement and its development in adaptation to the local environment passed down through generations.¹⁹ Long before this international recognition, the site had already been selected as an "Important Preservation

¹⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama*, in "UNESCO World Heritage Convention", 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/734/>.

District for Groups of Traditional Buildings" in 1976. As a matter of fact, the village preserves historical Gassho-style houses dating from around the 17th to 19th centuries (although human settlement in the area is much older, dating back to approximately 11th century). The surrounding environment directly shaped the village's layout, dictating, for example, the orientation of the houses in relation to the river, or their position to facilitate snow drainage during winter.²⁰

What makes this village particularly significant, however, is the residents' commitment to conservation efforts, which began in the 1970s, prior to its UNESCO status, through the Organization for the Protection of the Natural Environment (1974).

Furthermore, Shirakawa-mura is an autonomous municipality which works closely with this organization to provide guidelines and, most notably, to set acceptable limits on tourism growth. Indeed, residents have established different standards to protect their homes and the natural surroundings, which have been passed down through generations; any territorial changes require the local government approval, in a process that involves consultations with the various civil stakeholders.²¹ This resolute cooperation has been the key element to the success of the revitalization project. Additionally, the small population size further facilitated the process, as most residents sat on local deliberative councils, allowing for more transparent and direct management, without heavily relying on external financing.

Yet, the recent boom in international tourism has exposed Shirakawa-go to the problem of overtourism. The local community of around 1,500 residents suddenly had to manage over 2.15 million annual visitors, resulting in issues

²⁰ KURODA Nobu, "Conservation Design for Traditional Agricultural Villages: A Case Study of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama in Japan", *Built Heritage*, 3, 2, 2019, cit., pp. 10-11.

²¹ See KURODA, Conservation..., pp. 19-20.

like traffic congestion, noise disturbances, and littering.²² In a certain way, for popular destinations such as Shirakawa and Ogimachi, it is inevitable that such phenomena will arise sooner or later; what actually makes the difference is how a community responds and whether it can resist sacrificing the environment for quick financial returns.

The residents of Shirakawa-go responded quite proactively in acknowledging and addressing these tensions. For example, in 2024, it was launched a pilot project in collaboration with Nagoya University, that paired qualitative surveys on local attitudes toward tourist, with AI vehicle-counting systems to forecast visitors' density. By cross-referencing these findings, it was possible to establish a daily visitor threshold within which residents were able to manage arrivals without significant disruption, also in anticipation of potential future entry quotas.²³ A parallel initiative targeted, instead, visitor awareness and waste management, as well as identifying possible shortcomings in official communication channels. Visitors were surveyed about their information sources and their willingness to pay a small charge to contribute to proper waste disposal; the results revealed, perhaps surprisingly, that more than half of the international tourists were willing to pay such environmental fee.²⁴ These findings were then analyzed alongside local authorities to define resolution strategies, recognizing, for example, the need for a stronger social media

²² URATA Mayu, *Sekai isan Shirakawa-gō ni okeru ōbātsūrizumu taisaku e muketa dejitaru gijutsu no katsuyō* (The Use of Digital Technology for Overtourism Countermeasures at the World Heritage Site of Shirakawa-go), in "Nagoya University", 2024

浦田真由、「世界遺産白川郷におけるオーバーツーリズム対策へ向けたデジタル技術の活用」、名古屋大学、2024 年、<https://www.nagoya-u.ac.jp/social/upload/R6-03jyouhougaku.pdf>, cit., pp. 1.

²³ See URATA, *Sekai isan...*;

²⁴ OKAGAWA Rika, URATA Mayu, ENDO Mamoru, "Study on the behavior and awareness of international tourists visiting Shirakawa-go: Toward sustainable tourism management", *Journal of Global Tourism Research*, 10, 2, 2025, cit., pp. 161.

dissemination since international visitors rarely accessed the official municipal website.²⁵

Despite these proactive efforts, there are conflicting opinions regarding the effects of international recognition, and Shirakawa-go is not without its weaknesses. Omoto et al. argue that Shirakawa-go represents a failure of international system's integration, claiming that while heritage preservation belonged entirely to the community prior to UNESCO registration, after it external interventions actively hindered local initiatives.²⁶ However, this view appears to portray the inhabitants as passive bystanders of this process and attributes to UNESCO solely a catalytic role, overlooking its actual relevance, which is to internationally validate and safeguard the site.

Furthermore, Shirakawa-go's flaws, cannot be attributed entirely or directly to tourist flows. For instance, one of the issues identified by Jimura is the limited attention devoted to the natural surroundings of the site. Yet, this problem originates primarily from the domestic tourism that sustained the village during the 1990s and which, as discussed at length in the preceding sections, was the product of a mindset that conceived of nature solely in relation to its function; consequently, what fell outside the tourist gaze, in this case the site's periphery, was mostly neglected.²⁷ The core problem, therefore, does not lie in tourism per se, but in the ideological framework through which it is interpreted.

²⁵ See OKAGAWA, URATA, ENDO, *Study on the behavior...*;

²⁶ Cf. OMOTO Suzuko, NAKAGAWA Chigusa, "Kokusaiteki kankyō hozen seido no chiiki ni yoru tsukaikonashi: Aya Yunesuko ekopaku wo jirei ni" (Regional Appropriation of International Environmental Conservation Systems: The case of the UNESCO Aya Ecopark), *Kankyo Shakaigaku Kenkyu*, 22, 2017

大元鈴子、中川千草、「国際的環境保全制度の地域による使いこなしー綾ユネスコエコパークを事例にー」、環境社会学研究、第22巻、2017年、pp. 102.

²⁷ JIMURA Takamitsu, "The impact of world heritage site designation on local communities: A case study of Ogimachi, Shirakawa-mura, Japan", *Tourism Management*, 32, 2011, cit., pp. 293.

While mass tourism can bring clear disadvantages, it also generates new business opportunities and a renewed sense of local pride, both of which, arguably ensured the village's survival. Indeed, tourism ultimately provided a stable economic revenue that was able to offset the decline of the agricultural and construction sectors, which were originally the dominant industries until 1990s; indeed, by attracting visitors throughout all year, Ogimachi had overcome the uncertainty usually associated with tourism, turning into a reliable industry to run alongside traditional sectors.²⁸

THE TOYOOKA WHITE STORK: Ecological Restoration and Ecotourism

The reintroduction of the Oriental white stork in the city of Toyooka represents another ideal model of the integration of human activities into ecological systems, which has simultaneously boosted city's tourism appeal. What makes this case unique is the interaction between these two elements, which is not grounded merely in the conventional principle of non-harm, but rather constitutes a relationship of reciprocal interdependence and exchange.

Historically, the Oriental white stork (*Ciconia boyciana*) was widespread throughout the valley of the Maruyama River, a muddy expanse in Hyogo Prefecture that constituted its natural habitat. It was then a relatively familiar bird for those who used to farm rice paddies of the area. During the Meiji period, as result of pesticide use and deforestation, the habitat was destroyed, leading to its gradual extinction, culminated in 1971 with the death of the last specimen.²⁹

²⁸ JIMURA, The impact..., cit., pp. 293-294.

²⁹ For this and further information about the project concerning the Toyooka stork, please refer to SHIMIZU Mayuko, "Jizoku kanō na chiiki hatten no bunseki wakugumi: Hyōgo-ken Toyooka-shi kounotori to kyōsei suru chiiki zukuri no jirei kenkyū kara" (An Analytical Framework for Sustainable Community Development: A Case Study of

Captive breeding efforts began as early as the 1950s, with the ultimate goal of rewilding the species. To this end, the Park of the Oriental White Stork was established in Toyooka in 1999, and in the years that followed, a series of experimental wild releases were undertaken.

For the city's residents, the stork became a powerful trigger for engagement not only in the protection of the bird itself, but also in broader activities to regenerate the local territory, as it was the species' natural habitat. This collective participation was further sustained by a sense of affection toward the bird rooted in a history of coexistence, as well as by a shared pride in being the only place in Japan where the species successfully breeds.³⁰ A range of initiatives were subsequently undertaken, including the restoration of rice paddies, the installation of fishways, the creation of wetland environments to support the reproduction of the stork's prey and others. A significant effort was also made in incentivizing a pesticide-free organic farming.³¹ It should be noted, however, that in this case as well, local authorities played an essential role in steering these activities; Indeed, Toyooka Regional Improvement Office (豊岡土地改良事務所, *Toyooka Tochi Kairyō Jimusho*) organized and financed training courses and managing conservation measures on regular basis.³²

the Regional Development for Living in Harmony with the Oriental White Stork in Toyooka City, Hyogo Prefecture), *Kankyō Shakaigaku Kenkyū*, 18, 2012

清水万由子、「持続可能な地域発展の分析枠組み－兵庫県豊岡市コウノトリと共生する地域づくりの事例研究から－」、環境社会学研究、第 18 号、2012 年、pp. 112-125;

and SATO Tetsu, “Kankyō aikon toshite no yasei seibutsu to chiiki shakai: Aikonha no purosesu to seitaikai sabisu ni kansuru kagaku no yakuwari” (Wildlife as Environmental Icons and Local Communities: The Role of Science Regarding the Process of Iconization and Ecosystem Services), *Kankyō Shakaigaku Kenkyū*, 14, 2008

佐藤哲、「環境アイコンとしての野生生物と地域社会－アイコン化のプロセスと生態系サービスに関する科学の役割－」、環境社会学研究、第 14 号、2008 年、pp. 70-85.

³⁰ See SATO Tetsu, *Kankyō aikon...*, pp. 72-24.

³¹ See SHIMIZU, *Jizoku...*, pp. 115-120.

³² See SHIMIZU, *Jizoku...*, pp. 117.

In any case, the new organic farming methods were not only capable of protecting the stork's habitat but also of generating added value for local products, in terms of food safety and quality. The case subsequently attracted media attention from neighbouring regions, and residents began to regard the stork and the new organic industry as an opportunity for local promotion.³³

The Toyooka case demonstrates that economic activity and environmental conservation can be made to coincide. Furthermore, tourism was here complemented by a sustainable agricultural industry. On one hand, this makes it possible to prevent the problem of overdependence on the tourism industry, which, as Yanagawa et al. notes, tends to erode the resilience of local economies.³⁴ On the other hand, since tourism is not the city's sole economic resource, it is possible to achieve a more controlled and environmentally responsible management of it.

Furthermore, as Sato highlights, environmental icons, such as the Toyooka stork, act as a “centripetal force”, capturing public attention.³⁵ Investing in the quest of such icons, then, also means deepening knowledge of one's own territory, bringing the community closer to nature, and unlocking new possibilities in terms of economic returns through sustainable production industries. Similarly, tourism can serve as the initial spark for the identification of such icons and the primary vehicle through which they can be made to stand out.

³³ Cf. SATO Tetsu, *Kankyō aikon...*;

³⁴ YANAGAWA Tamiko, CHIBA Rimi, “The success factors of rural tourism in Japan and research challenges for sustainable tourism”, *Resource Data Journal*, 4, 2025, cit., pp. 235.

³⁵ SATO Tetsu, *Kankyō aikon...*, cit., pp. 77.

The success of both case studies is closely tied to the strong engagement and participation demonstrated by both residents and local governments, which enabled the effective fruition of available natural resources without compromising their integrity. A further key element is the diversification of local industries, in such a way as to avoid excessive dependence on tourism incomes, which frequently relegate environmental conservation to a secondary role.

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be taken into account in view of a potential replication of these models in other tourism contexts. First, both cases presented highly specific features: the presence of the stork in Toyooka and UNESCO recognition in Ogimachi. This suggests that sustainable tourism, no matter how well-managed, cannot represent the sole strategy on which the government relies to revitalize rural areas. As a matter of fact, if were this to be the case, only those regions blessed with attractive resources would benefit from it.³⁶

Second, as already mentioned, these models succeeded in part through collaboration with local associations and groups. However, as outlined in the second chapter, Japanese civil society is severely weakened by legislative and financial constraints. Until these gaps are at least partially addressed, the scope of ecotourism will remain limited, given the difficulty of securing adequate funding and specialized staff.

Jonas further notes that one of the principal obstacles to the sustainable development of the tourism sector is the lack of a comprehensive, long-term vision capable of effectively accounting for regional needs.³⁷ This problem, regarding the centre-periphery communication and the vagueness in the

³⁶ YANAGAWA, CHIBA, *The success factors...*, cit., pp. 235.

³⁷ JONAS, *A life cycle...*, cit., pp. 191.

formulation of objectives, mirrors the structural flaws that undermine Japanese environmental policy, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

In conclusion, ecotourism can represent a valuable resource for peripheral areas; however, for it to become an effective tool in the service of both regional communities and the environment, it is necessary that governments acknowledge and address these foundational inefficiencies.

CONCLUSIONS

This work presented the theme of nature protection within three different dimensions —the religious, the political-institutional, and the tourist one— each of them revealing fundamental contradictions between rhetoric and implementation.

However, the significance of this study extends beyond the identification of these individual inconsistencies; rather, it lies in demonstrating that these three domains are deeply interwoven, and that their trajectories cannot be understood in isolation from the conceptual contexts in which they have developed.

The first sphere, examined in the Chapter 1, revealed how shinto has been strategically repositioned as an ecological tradition, serving nationalist agendas while providing limited concrete environmental support. The third sphere, explored in the Chapter 3, illustrated how tourism represent a potential mechanism for rural revitalization and environmental conservation, yet remains vulnerable to the same commodification of nature that has characterized Japan's relationship with its landscape, which evolved throughout pseudo-religious contexts. Lastly, the second sphere, analyzed in the Chapter 2, defines how Japan's civil society organizations are systematically marginalized by structural and institutional constraints, deprived of appropriate funding and political influence.

The interconnection between these three spheres becomes particularly evident when considering the role of civil society in environmental conservation. Civil society organizations require both financial resources, social cohesion and professional members, which are the most vital conditions necessary to translate environmental knowledge into effective action. Nevertheless, Japanese NGOs and NPOs have historically struggled to acquire them, forcing many to operate at the margins of the political system. Here, tourism emerges as a potential, if partial, solution: tourism's capacity to attract external interest can be redirected to serve environmental and social goals. Indeed, it can provide financial foundation for environmental organizations to strengthen their advocacy, while simultaneously fostering the regional revitalization. Yet, this local empowerment is possible only when the tourist industry is managed by and for local communities rather than by centralized interests, and when nature is seen as a protagonist rather than an object of exploitation.

In light of this, tackling Japan's environmental challenges requires a fundamental reorientation of the institutional relationships between the government, business and civil society, with the understanding that a change in one domain inevitably affects the others.

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Figure 4: JNTO (Japan National Tourism Organization), *Visitor Arrivals*, in “Japan Tourism Statistics”, 2026, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--inbound--travelers--transition>, 20/05/2026

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Debora Cocco, student ID number 878445, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Bachelor's/Master's Degree Programme in Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, author of the final paper/degree thesis "Beyond Green Rhetoric Environmental Groups, State Policy, and the Limits of Ecological Action in Japan", thesis supervisor Hirofumi Utsumi, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under his/her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

- ☐ that he/she has **NOT** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of the final paper/degree thesis;
- ☒ that he/she **HAS** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of his/her final paper/degree thesis, in particular:
- Gemini-Flash 3.5; Claude-Sonnet 4.6; NotebookLM.
 - I used these AI tools mainly for the revision of the text's grammatical accuracy and syntax. Furthermore, they have also been used as a resource to support with the translation from Italian to academic English. Finally, I also made use of AI as a reference to identify potential sources that might be useful during my research.
 - All the chapters were concerned in the grammar checking and translation.
 - The AI was used only as a reference and corrector; there is no unverified information since I personally wrote the paper based on the sources and my research.

DECLARES FURTHER

that all material generated by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.

Debora Cocco.