

## **Japan's stories toward a sustainable society**

Junko Edahiro

Thank you, chairperson, for your kind introduction. KONNICHIWA! Greetings from Japan. Distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to have been invited to speak at this important international meeting. Please allow me to say a few words of self-introduction. With the ultimate aim of helping to create a sustainable society, I lecture and write in Japan, and I also translate into Japanese the latest information as well key messages from around the world. I have been honored to have had the opportunity to bring to Japan the words and writings of the environmental academic Lester Brown, Dennis Meadows, for example, and also to translate Mr. Al Gore's book, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Eight years ago, I started an e-mail newsletter that provides a variety of environment-related information in Japanese. Today I have almost 10,000 subscribers, including people in national and local governments, the business world, NGOs, and universities. Going in the reverse direction, to communicate environmental information from Japan to the rest of the world in English, five years ago I launched with some colleagues and an NGO called "Japan for Sustainability," which is one of the media partners from this conference. Today, we disseminate latest initiatives, technologies as well as old wisdom in the field of sustainability from Japan to 189 countries. If you are interested, please visit our English website and subscribe our monthly newsletter.

Now, may I ask you a question? When you hear the words "Japan" and "sustainability," what kind of image comes to mind? Long ago, the Japanese lived in harmony with nature. Our houses were not built with solid brick and stone like in the West, but with soft materials like wood and paper. Even when the Japanese were inside their homes, they were aware of the wind and insects singing outside. During the hot summers, people cooled their senses by sprinkling water on the ground and by enjoying the sound of wind chimes. The traditional way of life was close to nature.

Allow me to mention a bit about the Edo Period, when the city of Edo—now known as Tokyo—was the center of Japan. The 265 years from 1603 to 1867 are known as the Edo Period. Japan was closed to the outside world and enjoyed a time of relative peace, with virtually no wars throughout the land.

Japan's economy and culture flourished, independently from the rest of the world.

The country's population during this 250-year period was stable at about 30 million. Edo is estimated to have had a population of between 1 and 1.25 million people, making it largest city in the world at the time. Incidentally, the population of London was about 860,000 then, and Paris held about 670,000 people.

Today Japan depends on overseas imports for 80 percent of its energy, 60 percent of its food, and 80 percent of its timber. In contrast, during the Edo Period, because Japan was a closed country, there were no imports from overseas. Everything was done using energy and resources obtained within country.

Let's look at this again. The population numbers were stable; society functioned and people made their livelihoods using mostly the plant-based resources and energy created from the sun the previous year; and a rich culture flourished under these conditions. You could say that a truly sustainable society existed in Japan during the Edo Period. Because all resources were regarded as precious, plenty of businesses evolved to deal with re-use and recycling. There were businesses that specialized in repairing metal goods; old cooking pots and kettles and other items of metal could be repaired and used again. There were special tradesmen who would repair wooden barrels and pails used to hold liquids. During this era, everything was repaired properly and used as long as possible. Paper lanterns and locks were repaired, mirrors were polished, and so on.

Specialized businesses would purchase waste paper, used clothes, and used pails. There were even businesses that would buy the valuable wax drippings from candles and use them to make new candles to sell, and businesses that would buy the ash left from burning fuel wood and sell it to farmers as fertilizer. At a time when, in Europe, human waste was thrown out of windows and diseases like the Plague spread across the land, in Japan, even human waste was used as a precious resource to be bought and sold. In fact, human waste from the richer neighborhoods apparently went for the highest prices because it had the highest nutrient content!

Since long ago, people used certain expressions closely related to concepts of sustainable lifestyles – expressions like *taru wo shiru*, which means “Be satisfied with what you have,” and *mottainai*, which means “Don't waste!” One expression I am very fond of is *seoi mizu*, *mizu* means “water” and *seoi* means “you carry on your shoulder”, which literally means “water you carry,” although this term is not commonly used any more. Behind this saying was the idea that when you are born, you carry with you all of the water you will use during your lifetime. Basically, this saying taught us that

if we use something wastefully, we will be in trouble later on in life, so we must use everything very carefully. This expression said it all in just a few words.

These are glimpses of the sustainable lifestyles that the Japanese were living then. But in the midst of the postwar reconstruction after Japan was defeated in the Second World War, an emphasis was put on hard-working and technological advances. Society and the economy were rebuilt upon a system that promoted consumption, with the idea that “consumption as a virtue.” The idea of “catching up and passing” captures the spirit of the day. Even today, now that Japan has joined the ranks of developed countries, I believe it has not yet escaped this developing-country mentality.

What about Japan today? The picture is not a simple one. We are told that adults and children do not smile as much as they used to. Suicide rates have risen, and the environment is deteriorating. But while we are often faced with depressing news, we can also sense the beginning of change and the beat of a new era. Progress is evident in the development of a variety of environmental technologies, which you can read at our JFS information database, and Japan is actively transferring them to developing countries in particular in Asia. A lot of people are also asking themselves what true happiness really is. Today I would like to introduce to you now some stories and initiatives that are not broadcast by TV or put in newspapers but might capture your interest especially in cultural sense.

The idea of “slow food” (in contrast to “fast food”) grew out of Italy, but after landing in Japan it evolved into the whole concept of “slow life.” There is a growing interest in living life to the fullest, rather than simply chasing after speed and efficiency. The Governor of Iwate Prefecture issued a “Take-It-Easy Declaration” in 2001 to launch a movement to put happiness before economic efficiency. He explained as follows.

“Let's make our life in the new century more human, more natural, and more simple”-these ideas indicate Iwate's ideal with “take-it-easy” slogan. For example, Iwate's approach to buildings is to conserve traditional wooden houses that stand in harmony with nature, rather than to cut forests to make way for state-of-the-art buildings. Such a sense of harmonious coexistence between nature and humans is highly valued in Iwate's take-it-easy movement.

By the way, this governor is now the minister of Public Management, Home Affairs, Post and Telecommunications at the Japanese National Government.

Iwate Prefecture is not an exception. More than ten cities in Japan have issued a “Slow-Life City

Declaration,” and they are organizing conferences called “Slow-Life City Summits.” And there are many specialized magazines to tell people how to live slowly.

Here is another small but true story. When a new condominium was to be built at a place about an hour out of Tokyo, the prospective residents got into a huge debate about whether or not an elevator should be installed. Aware that elevators consume electricity, some said that the building should have no elevator, in order to help combat global warming. Others said that an elevator is needed for the elderly persons who would be living in the building. They had a hard time reaching any consensus, but in the end an excellent solution was proposed. Guess what?— a “slow elevator.” An elevator would be installed, but it would move so slowly that most people would not want to wait for it. Because most people can climb the stairs much more quickly, they would probably not use the elevator. But seniors and others who really have to use the elevator are usually not as pressed for time, so they will not mind waiting to use an elevator that moves slowly. This is an example of innovative solutions popping up around us, inspired by this key word of “slow.” Several years ago, one of the best selling books in Japan was titled “Slow is Beautiful”.

Here is another example. Five years ago I was one of a group of people who proposed the idea of “Candle Night for a Million.” We asked people to spend a “slow” evening, turning off the lights for two hours on the night of the summer and winter solstices. This idea has grown to the point that many events are now held around the country on the nights of the solstices, with 8 to 10 million people participating in ways they themselves choose. I believe this phenomenon is a sign that people are trying to reclaim their own time, their own lives, and their own happiness. During the summer candle night this year, Japan’s Ministry of the Environment joined as a partner in the appeal. In total, 63,138 facilities nationwide joined in the lights-out event, including a famous landmark known as the Tokyo Tower, resulting in a reduction of close to 1 million kilowatt-hours of electrical consumption.

In a separate interesting initiative, a group of key musicians in the Japanese music scene, including the world well-known Ryuichi Sakamoto, got together with their own money to launch the artists’ power, “ap bank.” It finances projects in renewable energy and other areas, and promotes environmental activities. Over 30,000 people gather at the “ap bank fes” outdoor concert held each year to raise funds for the bank, and it has grown into a huge event. At the concert, garbage is separated into 11 categories, and all plates and cutlery at food stalls are reusable. All power for the concert comes from renewable energy, including electricity for the concert itself and the energy for the shuttle buses to bring concert-goers to the venue.

The business world, as well, known for pursuing efficiency and economic growth above all else, is starting to show signs of change. Many “servicizing” businesses are appearing on the scene to provide *functions* and *services*, instead of simply *selling products*. It is also known as PSS: Product-Service System.

Let me give you some examples of servicing businesses. A distributor of work uniforms that leases the uniforms to companies for employees to use, started to collect and recycle the materials after they are worn out. Panasonic, an electrical good manufacturer offers a fluorescent lamp leasing service, in which it sells the “functions” of comfortable lighting to factories and office buildings rather than fluorescent lamps themselves. Another company offer an air-conditioning service incorporating a leasing scheme for air-conditioning systems, and payments are calculated based on the amount of air controlled by the air-conditioning system. A supplier of industrial pure water services installs its ultra-pure water production system at the site of client companies, who pay for expenses calculated based on the amount of water used, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industries set up a special commission to promote servicing development and produced a manual with over 80 case studies.

Some companies in Japan have been inspired by the example of the mountainous country of Bhutan in Asia, which, as an indicator of national progress instead of GDP or GNP uses GNH— What is GNH? Instead of Gross National Product, it means Gross National Happiness. One of impressed companies in Japan is trying to measure corporate progress with an indicator of GCH, “Gross Company Happiness.” When thinking about the happiness of their employees, about ten years ago, the company’s president considered their current sales levels to be too high, and put negative annual sales growth targets for about ten years. The result? I asked the company president. He said because of this unusual policy, which makes their employees happier with more smiles toward their customers, it has been difficult for his company to curb the sales! The company is now one of the model companies in Japan, cherished by their employees and local communities.

Humanity is being threatened by climate change and other environmental problems. In order to solve these problems, I believe there are five things we need—to *know*, to *create a vision*, to *grasp the big picture*, to *act*, and to *communicate to others*.

None of these come completely together in just one country, or in just one region. Today, the time has come for us to create something new—across borders, across the East and West. We must move from one-way communication and even from two-way communication of sharing experience and learning from each other, to what I call “co-creative or generative communication to create new

paradigm and values by cultivating what East and West can offer.

In this context, the conference at which we gather today is of great significance. It was my pleasure to have been invited from Japan to say a few words at the beginning of meeting. I am sure that we will have very fruitful discussions here. Thank you for your kind attention.