

"We Japanese generally agree that the great natural universe is our home, and that all living things should coexist in harmony with the natural universe. We believe that all living things—humans, animals, trees, grasses—are essentially brothers and sisters."

—Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, in an address before the commemorative session of the fortieth anniversary of the UN, October 1985.

Japan. The land of talking Toyotas and paper fans, of advanced robotics and silk kimonos, of miniaturisation and incredible overcrowding, and, as we in the West are given to believe, of a unique aesthetic sense, a love of beauty and nature. The Japanese identify closely with the processes of nature, particularly the unfolding seasons. The first faintly pink cherry blossoms draw appreciative crowds, and within days, millions of devotees are partying under the trees. The glowing autumnal hills covered with maples are the theme of many a weekend trip and the source of delight for countless thousands of mountain hikers. Signs of a people at one with nature—or are they?

Travel Japan with your eyes open, live there a while, or investigate Japan's market connections and you will see another reality: the world's largest trader in endangered species, the biggest tropical timber market, the main importer of musk, the greatest consumer of ivory products, the most incorrigible killer of whales—and, closer to home, the Japanese are concreters of rivers and coastlines, bird-catchers, passionate rare-species collectors, hunters on a grand scale.

As much as they 'love' nature, the Japanese 'love' wildlife, especially wildlife products: Japan ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1980 but placed more reservations on Appendix I species (the most endangered) than any other country. And it also continues to trade in CITES species that it hasn't placed reservations on and has no documentation for, thereby ignoring its responsibilities as a signatory to the convention. For example, 80-90 per cent of the world's trade in musk ends up in Japan, and in the mid-1980s Japan's ivory imports peaked at more than 475 tonnes per year; it was also importing 30 tonnes of hawksbill turtleshell and 200,000kg of crocodile and alligator skins per year.

And in terms of waste, Japan comes second to none. Each year, more than 165,000 cubic metres of wood, enough to build 11,000 houses, are used just to produce disposable chopsticks. Although Japan represents less than 3 per cent of the world's population, it consumes more than 30 per cent of the timber in world trade.

How can we explain the paradox, the image of the Japanese as nature-lovers and

their reality as rampant consumers and despoilers?

Japan, on the one hand, is blessed with much natural beauty: the sea is never far away, the mountains are usually in view, there are beautiful waterfalls and rocky coasts, the seasons are richly varied and, for most of the year, the country is luxuriantly green. Yet, on the other hand, the country is cursed with an industrial bureaucratic machine hellbent on destroying it all. It is a race to see the blue corals of Ishigaki island before the airport destroys them, the ancient Shirakami beech forest of Akita and Aomori prefectures before the road bisects it, the pristine coastline of Hokkaido before a vastly expensive concrete shell engulfs it in the name of coastal protection.

At the root of our misunderstanding is a marked cross-cultural difference in the meaning of 'nature'. The Japanese word that comes closest to the concept as we mean it—'shizen'—is in fact a recent import, dating only from the last century. An older written form—'jinen'—did exist, but in the sense of 'self-generating' or 'not artificial'. The Japanese, in fact, do not love nature as we see it. They love nature as *they* see it, and that is quite different. They appreciate nature as art, rather than in the raw.

❧ The Japanese delight as much in the concept of their love of nature as in nature itself. ❧

Where, in the West, our cultures, laws and attitudes are built on and permeated by the basic tenets of Christianity, in Japan it is Buddhism and Shintoism that fulfil these roles. While our world is hierarchical, one with God above and man given sway over the rest of creation at the bottom, Buddhism teaches that all aspects of the world are one, and Shintoism reveres natural objects—a particular rock, tree or waterfall. We inhabit a world of separation, they a world of unity.

Our detachment from the natural world has, for centuries, enabled us to exploit it, and only latterly, as its guardians, to appreciate a responsibility to exercise restraint. The Japanese can be self-righteous about their harmony with nature and can believe that they live closer to nature than 'nature-dominating' Westerners do, but in Japan the opposite process has been occurring. For so long in harmony with their world, they now confront it.

And as they do so, they derive emotional comfort from the association of transcendence in nature with that in human life. Since man is natural, man-induced change is natural. Buddha-nature is in everything, be it a mountain or a slag-heap, a flower-filled

alpine meadow or a car-park. The Japanese philosophical background is thus not one inherently suited to defending nature on ecological grounds, where some things are natural and others, like straightened rivers, are not.

The love of nature is both selective and stylised. For example, love of the Japanese bush warbler's song (the bush warbler is Japan's nightingale), but not of birdsong as a whole, is instilled as a result of literary tradition. The same can be said for cherry blossoms, the love of which cannot be generalised to apple blossoms. The poets who originally expressed their thoughts on the bush warbler's song and the cherry blossoms probably did love the whole of nature, but now the populace has come to love only the symbols.

Several Japanese symbolic arts—ikebana, bonsai, the formal arrangement of stone and moss gardens—borrow from and express 'nature', but this 'nature' is controlled, formalised and meticulously manipulated in miniature. Trees are carefully trained by skilled gardeners to fulfil the ideal of a 'natural-looking' tree. But the natural untidiness of nature itself does not conform with the Japanese ideal view of the world as clean, neat and safe. Nature not controlled by man is disturbing; so, in order to obtain flawless natural beauty, man must at times make great efforts to modify it. The Japanese delight as much in the concept of their love of nature as in nature itself.

How do the Japanese accommodate this concept with the environmental destruction that their country is undergoing? This is made possible in part by the ability to wear a mask and in part by the ability to look away. The three famous see-no-evil, speak-no-evil and hear-no-evil monkeys have long been regarded as wise. But is it, in fact, wise to close your eyes and ears to evil and never to complain?

For a traditionally agricultural people closely attached to their land and with a strong awareness of natural beauty, the past century's rapid urbanisation and economic growth have created a vacuum that appears to have been filled by consumerism. This has made the people materially rich but spiritually poor, and has made the Japanese among the world's worst environmental vandals.

The Industrial Revolution, of course, took its toll in Europe, too, but Europeans have had a long, slow period of readjustment to an altering landscape, to the losses of habitat and species. The sudden rush to industrialisation—with its side-effects of litter, of waste, of extraordinary levels of noise and other forms of pollution—has come all the harder to a people with such a strong affinity for the natural beauty of their own country.

That is, for those who still have an idea of what natural beauty means... Increasing migration to the cities, as well as urbanisation of much of the populace that has