

# Finding the Voice of Japanese Wilderness

BY AYA HAYASHI

## Introduction

Although the word *wilderness* is not familiar to the Japanese people, the Japanese concept of wilderness can be seen in its view of nature. The Japanese view of nature has helped to develop the Japanese sense of values, ethics, and aesthetics of unifying Japanese life with nature. This article describes the Japanese wilderness and the Japanese view of nature as affected by geography and culture and discusses future issues of development.

*At the present time,  
Since I could bring no offering,  
See Mount Tamuke!  
Here are brocades of red leaves,  
As a tribute to the gods.  
(Kanke, Circa 845–903)*

Many old Japanese songs, called *haiku*, tell us how close a relationship with nature the ancient Japanese people had and how they enjoyed life blessed by nature in those days. The ancient Japanese people seemed to have dialogues about nature. From these songs, we see a sensitivity to nature that the modern Japanese may have lost, just as they have lost much of their natural environment. There is a move-

ment in Japan of people who are trying to revive this traditional Japanese view of nature. For example, the International Research Center for Japanese Study conducted research in 1990 and 1991 regarding the Japanese indigenous view of nature from the Jomon Period (10000 B.C to 400 B.C) to the present, which involved considering the viewpoints of history,

ethnology, literary, and comparative culture. This research suggested reconsidering the relationship between people and nature (Ito 1995). As one's view of nature influences one's behavior toward the natural environment, reflecting on traditional views may bring about a new approach for future development of a relationship between humans and nature.

## The Traditional Japanese View of Nature

Originally, there was no word corresponding to "nature" in the Japanese language. The reason the Japanese did not have the concept of nature as a separate term is that nature and people's lives were unified. Nature had existed as itself and did not include any concept that implied the opposite meaning of artificiality (Momokawa 1995). The word *nature* was translated into Japanese as *shizen* borrowed from a Chinese word from the 19th century. However, *shizen* encompassed several definitions that originated differently from the Japanese view of nature. Therefore, comparison with the Western view of nature is often used in order to reveal the Japanese view (Tsukahara 1984; Umehara 1995). A view of nature may be clarified by examining the two common types of relationship between nature and humans: (1) humans as a part of nature, such as in the Japanese or Eastern view of nature; and (2) humans as separate from nature, such as in the Western view of nature. Although an animistic view originated in many societies, factors like geography, climate, and history led to different types of relationships with nature in each society (Tsukahara 1984).

## Geographic and Climatic Influence on View of Nature

The reason for these different views is often explained as a geographic artifact (Yasuda 1997; Suzuki 1998). The Western view of nature, which reflected the Judeo-Christian tradition, was born in the desert areas of the Middle East. Due to



Article author Aya Hayashi and friend. Photo courtesy of Aya Hayashi.

the severe climate, the people who lived there looked at nature as harsh and separated nature from humans in order to survive. In this environment, the people carefully observed the rules of nature, and that is said to have been the start of natural science. They began to control the natural environment using new scientific knowledge that they had gained through their observation of the natural environment. They used the raw materials available for development. This raw material was supposedly given by God with the stipulation that people would have dominion over their environment and should modify it to their needs (Tsukahara 1984).

The Japanese view of nature was born in a less harsh environment of mountains and forests. Even today, 67% of Japan is mountain, forests, or fields (National Land Agency 1998), and the climate is affected by monsoon seasons. For ancient Japanese people, in this environment, nature was a mysterious and powerful place, and people developed effective methods for living in harmony with it. People realized that everything is ephemeral in the circulation of life, and they aimed for unification with all animate beings. They did not have ideas of “managing” nature (Gloy and Ishida 1994). The Japanese were awed by nature, saw divinities in natural beings, and believed that nature would retaliate if it were not treated with respect. This belief and attitude still exists today within the spiritual structure and religions of the Japanese people (National Parks Association of Japan 1996). This awe of nature has unintentionally benefited conservation.

Suzuki (1998) suggested that unifying with nature can be better realized in forests. In deserts, such unity may mean death due to the severe environment. Therefore, the relationship between people and nature evolved differently in each environment. In my

personal experience, when I went on a solo wilderness trip through a desert area of the United States, I had a totally different experience than when I did a solo trip in a Japanese forest. I felt awe and familiarity in assimilating myself into nature in Japanese forests. However, when I was in the desert in the United States, I was overwhelmed by the magnificence and felt isolated from nature. It was a very valuable opportunity to directly experience different types of wilderness and imagine the varying influences of each.

### The Effect of the Japanese Religion and Culture

The traditional Japanese view of nature can be found in Japanese religions and customs. Shinto is the Japanese traditional religion based on an ancient Japanese philosophy that is an animistic ethnic belief with influences from Buddhism and Confucianism. The main doctrine of Shinto is the worship of nature and the ancestors. In this philosophy, the Gods, called Kami, live everywhere, especially in pristine nature; humans are able to live by receiving blessings from nature. This pantheistic belief has developed from the basic Japanese way of thinking rather than from a religious doctrine. Today, some of these traditional customs remain in daily life. For example, before eating a meal we put our hands together in prayer, and say “Itadaki-masu,” which signifies an appreciation for the cook, farmers, Kami, ancestors, environment, and everything that went into the production and preparation of the food. Food symbolizes a kind of blessing from nature. The Japanese view of nature and the



Figure 1—Small shelters are built in the forest as a place to appreciate nature. Photo courtesy of Aya Hayashi.

concept of wilderness came from these geographic and religious contexts.

### The Concept of the Japanese Wilderness in the Traditional View of Nature

It is difficult to understand the meaning of wilderness for Japanese people because the concept of wilderness does not clearly exist in Japan. There are some



Figure 2—Waterfalls at Sandankyo Valley in the mountains near Hiroshima, Japan. Photo courtesy of Aya Hayashi.



Figure 3—The Mitaki Temple near Hiroshima, Japan is for the gods who live in nature. Photo courtesy of Aya Hayashi.

words that are used as a translation of wilderness, but these words do not correspond closely to the original meaning in English. The word *wilderness* is not usually translated into Japanese and is used for wilderness education or related topics. In conversation, words related to nature, such as *mountains*, *forests*, or *sea*, sometimes imply not only actual geographic areas, but also the meaning of wilderness.

The Mountain Belief, an ancient Japanese belief, might be a similar concept to the Western view of wilderness. Most mountains in Japan are covered by forests, and there are many Shinto shrines

and Buddhist temples in the mountains. Mountains are the place where Gods live and to which the souls of dead people climb. Mountains represented a model of the universe with high altitude and open places often having names associated with heaven; valleys, especially volcanic landforms, often called *hell*;

and the rivers between them connecting both worlds. People expected their personalities to develop through receiving the grace of God in mountains (Yamaori and Ohmori 1999). In historical literature, some mountains and Kami were given a high status, by the Imperial Court of ancient Japan, to show their relationship with people's life (Koizumi 2001). A sect of Buddhism called Shugendo developed out of these beliefs. Shugendo placed an emphasis on communication with nature, and its training was very strict, taking place in remote mountains. Certain parts of mountains, such as the summits, were

treated as sanctuaries for religious reasons. Ito (2000) explained that in those days the Japanese people tried to designate these places as *wilderness* by separating them from other places because there was little wilderness, in the Western sense, in remote areas of Japan because of the small amount of land.

## The Contemporary View of Nature

Japanese society has accepted science and technology from Western culture. As a result, people have become separated from nature and only value nature for the benefits that can be gained. Tsukahara (1984) pointed out that the awe toward nature in the traditional Japanese view has decreased and the contemporary view of nature is based both on superiority over nature and dependence on nature. Today, many Japanese people develop a view of nature without directly experiencing the historic and traditional relationship with nature. Some people say that the spiritual foundation of Japanese people is in danger, and that it is doubtful that the modern concept of nature will lead to the development of the relationship between humans and nature as a culture resource.

Some problems have been reported about the modern view of nature in Japan. For example, Tsukahara (1984) claimed that contemporary Japanese people lack responsibility for nature; whereas, the people in the United States developed a system of nature conservation. Sato (1996) mentioned that the Japanese have been so spoiled by nature that they still believe nature can accept anything and purify it. Miyauchi (1997) suggested that the Japanese should recognize that the damage from scientific technology is often beyond the ability of nature to correct, and they should seek new approaches utilizing the traditional view of nature.

Table 1—The Area of Designed Parks in Japan in 1999  
(Japanese Ministry of Environment 2001).

Designed Parks	Number	Area (ha)	Proportion of National Land (%)
National Parks	28	2,046,508	5.4
Quasi-National Parks	55	1,343,181	3.5
Local Natural Parks	307	1,957,360	5.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>5,347,049</b>	<b>14.2</b>

Table 2—The Area Designed for Conservation in Japan in 2000  
(Japanese Ministry of Environment 2001).

Conservation Area	Number	Area (ha)	Proportion of National Land (%)
Wilderness Area	5	5,631	0.02
Natural Conservation Area	10	21,593	0.06
Local Conservation Area	524	73,739	0.20

## Japanese Wilderness Management

Japan's National Parks Law, enacted in 1931 and rewritten in 1957, aims to conserve scenic areas and their ecosystems; to promote their utilization; and to contribute to the health, recreation and environmental education of the Japanese people (Table 1). The Nature Conservation Law was enacted in 1972 for the purpose of designating and conserving the natural environment, wilderness areas, nature conservation areas, and prefectural nature conservation areas in Japan (Table 2). The Nature Conservation Law followed the model of the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964. Ito (2000) has criticized the Nature Conservation Law because it mostly values conservation of valuable natural environments and neglects recreation use for its intrinsic value.

The National Parks Law and the Nature Conservation Law do not work well in some natural areas because of very complicated management systems. Only the wilderness areas designated by the Nature Conservation Law (Table 2) could be called *wilderness* with approximately the same meaning as wilderness areas defined by the World Wilderness Congress.

## Conclusion

The concept of wilderness and the Japanese view of nature have been influenced by geographic artifact and history. Eastern and Western concepts have developed independently according to unique social and cultural features. Each culture has developed its own approach to environmental issues to fit its own concept of nature. For example, the United States has sophisticated systems and techniques for resource management. Likewise, the Japanese view of nature may be useful for considering the management of the relationship

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between people and nature. If we are able to listen to the voice of nature as the ancient Japanese did, we can find what is really needed for nature as well as people, in terms of building a harmonious relationship, not only in scientific ways, but also in humane ways for mutual understanding. In wilderness, we may be able to give people opportunities to assimilate nature and listen to its voice, which, hopefully, will become the beginning of building a new relationship with nature. ♪

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Figure 4—Japanese children learn to develop a relationship with nature near Miyagi, Japan. Photo courtesy of Aya Hayashi.