



**Japan** 's environmental policy (日本の環境政策, *Nihon no Kankyō Seisaku* <sup>?</sup>, lit. "Japanese Environment Policy")

has reflected a tenuous balance between economic development and environmental protection. As the world's leading importer of both exhaustible and renewable natural resources and one of the largest consumers of

[fossil fuels](#)

, the Japanese government takes international responsibility to conserve and [protect the environment](#)

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### History

Environmental pollution has accompanied industrialization since the [Meiji period](#) . One of the earliest cases was the copper poisoning caused by drainage from the Ashio Copper Mine in Tochigi prefecture, beginning as early as 1878. Repeated floods occurred in the Watarase River basin, and 1,600 hectares of farmland and towns and villages in Tochigi and Gunma prefectures were damaged by the floodwater, which contained excessive inorganic copper compounds from the Ashio mine.

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The local farmers led by Shozo Tanaka, a member of the

[Lower House](#)

from Tochigi appealed to the prefecture and the government to call a halt to the mining operations. Although the mining company paid compensatory money and the government engaged in the embankment works of the Watarase river, no fundamental solution of the problem was achieved. The pollution had decreased since the early 20th centuries.

### Environment deterioration in the 1960s

Main article: [Four Big Pollution Diseases of Japan](#)

Current Japanese environmental policy and regulations were the consequence of a number of environmental disasters in 1950s and 1960s. Cadmium poisoning from industrial waste in Toyama Prefecture was discovered to be the cause of the extremely painful *itai-itai disease* (イタイイタイ病)

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*Itai itai byō*

[?](#)

, lit. "ouch ouch sickness")

which causes severe pain in the back and joints, contributes to brittle bones that fracture easily, and degeneration of the kidneys. Recovery of cadmium effluent halted the spread of the disease, and no new cases have been recorded since 1946. In the 1960s, thousands of inhabitants of Minamata City in

[Kumamoto Prefecture](#)

were poisoned by methylmercury drained from the chemical factory, known as the *Minamata disease*

. The number of casualties in Minamata is 6,500 as of November 2006.

In Yokkaichi, a port in Mie Prefecture, air pollution caused by sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide emissions led to a rapid increase in the number of people suffering from asthma and bronchitis. In urban areas photochemical smog from automotive and industrial exhaust fumes also caused the rise in respiratory problems. In the early 1970s, chronic arsenic poisoning attributed to dust from arsenic mines occurred in Shimane and Miyazaki prefectures.

[Consumers Union of Japan](#) was founded in 1969 to deal with health problems and false claims by companies, as Japan's rampant industrial development was seen as causing problems for consumers and citizens. In the 1970s, Consumers Union of Japan led the opposition to nuclear power, calling for a nation-wide Anti-Nuclear Power Week Campaign.

### Today

In the 1990s, Japan's environmental legislation was further tightened. In 1993 the government reorganized the environment law system and legislated the *Basic Environment Law* (基本環境法) and related laws. The law includes restriction of industrial emissions, restriction of products, restriction of wastes, improvement of energy conservation, promotion of recycling, restriction of land utilization, arrangement of environmental pollution control programs, relief of victims and provision for sanctions. The Environment Agency was promoted to full-fledged [Ministry of the Environment](#) in 2001, to deal with the deteriorating international environmental problems

In a 1984 the Environmental Agency had issued its first white paper. In the 1989 study, citizens thought environmental problems had improved compared with the past, nearly 1.7 % thought things had improved, 31 % thought that they had stayed the same, and nearly 21 % thought that they had worsened. Some 75 % of those surveyed expressed concern about [endangered species](#),

shrinkage of rain forests,

[expansion of deserts](#)

, destruction of the ozone layer, acid rain, and increased water and

[air pollution](#)

in

[developing countries](#)

. Most believed that Japan, alone or in cooperation with other industrialized countries, had the responsibility to solve environmental problems. In the 2007 opinion poll, 31.8% of the people answered environmental conservation activity leads to more economic development, 22.0% answered the environmental activity does not always obstruct the economic, 23.3% answered environmental conservation should be given preference even if it may obstruct the economic and 3.2% answered economic development should place priority than environmental conservation.

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The OECD's first Environmental Performance Review of Japan was published in 1994, which applauded the nation for decoupling its economic development from air pollution, as the nation's air quality improved while the economy thrived. However, it received poorer marks for water quality, as its rivers, lakes and coastal waters did not meet quality standards. <sup>[ 3 ]</sup> Another report in 2002 said that the mix of instruments used to implement environmental policy is highly effective and regulations are strict, well enforced and based on strong monitoring capacities.

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In the 2006 environment annual report, <sup>[ 5 ]</sup> the Ministry of Environment reported that current major issues are [global warming](#) and preservation of the [ozone layer](#), conservation of the atmospheric environment, water and soil, [waste management](#) and [recycling](#), measures for chemical substances, conservation of the natural environment and the participation in the international cooperation.

## Current Issues

### Waste management

Japan has of recent taken a much more proactive approach to waste management. In particular, Japanese city and prefectural authorities have focused on the reduction of solid waste going to landfill. This of course is in response to the lack of affordable space available for landfill sites. Their approach relies heavily on four major factors: 1) technological advancements in incineration 2) technological advancements in plastics recycling 3) Comprehensive production-side recycle stream package labeling and 4) wide consumer-side/household participation in recycling and waste material separation ("bunbetsu").

### Global warming

Main article: [Climate change in Japan](#)

As a signatory of the [Kyoto Protocol](#), and host of the 1997 conference which created it, Japan is under treaty obligations to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions level by 6% less than the level

in 1990, <sup>[ 6 ]</sup> and to take other steps related to curbing [climate change](#)

. Japan is the world's fifth biggest emission emitter

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The

[Cool Biz campaign](#)

introduced under former

[Prime Minister of Japan](#)

[Junichiro Koizumi](#)

was targeted at reducing energy use through the reduction of

[air conditioning](#)

use in government offices.

### **Nuclear power**

See also: [Nuclear power in Japan](#)

Japan maintains one third of its electric production from nuclear power plants. While majorities of citizens generally support the use of existing nuclear reactors, <sup>[ 8 ]</sup> some raise objections against the plan to construct further plants.

The treatment of [radioactive wastes](#) also became a subject of discussion in Japan. New spent-nuclear-fuel [reprocessing plant](#) was constructed in

Rokkasho in 2008, the site of the

[underground nuclear-waste repository](#)

for the HLW and LLW has not yet decided. Some local cities announced a plan to conduct an environmental study at the disposal site, but citizens' groups oppose strongly against the plan.

### **Fishery and whaling**

Main articles: [Fishing industry in Japan](#) and [Whaling in Japan](#)

In the Japanese diets, fish and its products are more prominent than other types of meat. Because of the depletion of ocean stocks in the late 20th century, Japan's total annual fish catch has been diminishing rapidly. Japan, along with the United States and the European Union, occupies the large part of international fish trade. <sup>[ 9 ]</sup> Japanese fish catches were the third in the world in 2000, following China and Peru. The United States, Chile, Indonesia, the Russian Federation and India were other major countries.

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By 2004, the number of adult Atlantic bluefin tuna capable of spawning had plummeted to roughly 19 percent of the 1975 level in the western half of the ocean. Japan has a quarter of the world supply of the five big species: bluefin, southern bluefin, bigeye, yellowfin and albacore. [ 1 ]

After the moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, Japanese government started its whaling for research purposes the following year. This whaling program has been criticized by environmental protection groups and anti-whaling countries, who say that the program is not for scientific research.

### Urban planning



Densely packed buildings in Hamamatsucho, Tokyo.

The massive nationwide rebuilding efforts in the aftermath of World War II, and the development of the following decades, led to even further urbanization and construction. The construction industry in Japan is one of its largest, and while Japan maintains a great many parks and other natural spaces, even in the hearts of its cities, there are few major restrictions on where and how construction can be undertaken. [Alex Kerr](#), in his books "Lost Japan" and "Dogs & Demons", [ 12 ] is one of a number of authors who focuses heavily on the environmental problems related to Japan's construction industry, and the industry's lobbying power preventing the introduction of stricter zoning laws and other environmental protection efforts.

### Electronic waste management

Main article: [Electronic waste in Japan](#) **See also**

- [List of environmental issues](#)
- [Environmental movement](#)
- East Asian snowstorms of 2009-2010
- East Asian snowstorms of late 2009
- [Pollution in Japan](#)

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