

PREFACE TO THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

We are pleased to present the 50th anniversary edition of *Island of Dreams: Environmental Crisis in Japan*. Originally published in 1975, this book was the first comprehensive account in English of the historical, social, economic, political, and other factors that led to Japan's multi-environmental crises, with a focus on specific cases that burst into the news in the early 1970s. At the time, it didn't occur to us that *Island of Dreams* would still be relevant half a century later. Yet, as the philosopher George Santayana put it, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹

As we revisit what we wrote 50 years ago, we are struck by how much we can continue to learn from Japan's environmental justice struggles of the past to inform and inspire the vitally important efforts underway around the world to restore and protect the integrity of our Earth's biosphere.

In the early 1970s, environmental crises led to a rise of citizen activism that gripped Japan. We experienced this awakening firsthand, at times in dramatic ways. That period may feel distant to many in Japan today, especially to those who were born after the 1970s. But the core issues remain as urgent as ever in Japan and around the world—namely, preventing, stopping, reversing, and documenting ecological degradation and pursuing justice for the victims of environmental disasters.

Our account of Japan's environmental problems is an historic record of crisis and an inspiring story of resilience and determination. The victims and their supporters fought hard-won battles for recognition and redress. Their stories offer insights into the human ability to persist in the face of overwhelming odds.

Even today, people come to Japan from all over the world to learn about the hard lessons of pollution and be inspired by citizen activism for environmental justice. These visits recall our own 1972 tour of 52 sites with ongoing pollution and social conflict or proposed development that promised environmental destruction.

Sadly, many of the issues we documented in *Island of Dreams* five decades ago persist in Japan. Minamata Disease—severe neurological damage and

death caused by industrial mercury poisoning from the Chisso Corporation's chemical plant—was covered up for two decades by the company, even as mercury-contaminated fish killed and maimed people in local communities. Conflicts continue in courts and society today over who qualifies as a certified victim of Minamata Disease and how much financial compensation and healthcare support they should receive. These conflicts persist, despite a national law passed in 2009 to expand relief to Minamata Disease patients and two Supreme Court cases (2004 and 2013) that called on the government to widen the scope of its relief program.²

The history of Minamata Disease and the struggle of its victims continue to attract global attention for the lessons about environmental pollution and how to fight it. As reported in October 2024 on the website of the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, “Since its opening in January 1993, about 700,000 people from within Japan and from over 175 foreign countries [have visited] us to learn about pollution, the environment and human rights.”³

Similarly, the Kanemi Yusho (Rice Oil) Disaster caused by the contamination of rice bran oil with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxins continues to affect the lives of the original victims as well as their children and grandchildren. This poisoning, which occurred in 1968, led to widespread health issues, including painful and disfiguring skin conditions, liver damage, and birth defects. A 2021 medical survey of “next generation victims” found that many children and grandchildren of the original victims had similar health complaints.⁴ The Kanemi Rice Oil Company knew they were selling contaminated oil and attempted to cover up and deny their crime.

The relevance of *Island of Dreams* goes beyond the persistence of the crises it chronicles. The book raised deep concern about building nuclear power plants in Japan, a nation that is periodically hit by major earthquakes and tsunamis. This concern was tragically validated in 2011, when a massive earthquake caused a tsunami that struck the Fukushima nuclear power plant, resulting in the release of vast amounts of radiation. Today, huge and complex problems persist in the region, including attempts to contain the radiation that remains in the defunct power plant and solve the difficult problem of what to do with the thousands of bags of radioactive debris. The persistent efforts of Fukushima citizens to seek adequate care, compensation, and cleanup after that environmental disaster echo the stories we told half a century ago.⁵

Another pressing global environmental challenge is the proliferation of microplastics from practically every country.⁶ These tiny fragments from the plastic bags, bottles, and containers that people use every day find their way into oceans and waterways worldwide—and into the bodies of humans and

other animals. Like radiation, which is invisible, vast quantities of microscopic plastic have entered the food chain, affecting marine life, water quality, and ultimately human and animal circulatory systems. One source of microplastics is the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” a continent-sized patch of plastic waste in the Pacific Ocean that serves as a stark symbol of humanity’s collective failure to manage our waste.⁷

As we republish *Island of Dreams* in this Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, we invite readers to remember Japan’s environmental crises of the past and reflect on the global implications of these stories. We hope that making *Island of Dreams* available again will offer readers valuable insights to help us come together and protect our global environment into the future.

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