

Coexistence of Nature and Humans - the Path towards the 21st Century

Part 1: Introduction

"Looking back through history, it is only very recently that we have turned our eyes to, and started making attempts for, the safeguarding of life systems and the biodiversity of this planet Earth. I pray for the great success of all those who make such attempts. Because there is no other way left for us." (Bill Morrison, Permaculture, Preface to the Japanese edition)

One of the most important tasks for the 21st century is addressing the 'environmental problem'. In considering problems related to natural environment and agriculture in particular, we can think of various key phrases such as 'conservation of biodiversity', 'coexistence of nature and humans', 'society with self-contained circulation of resources', 'environmentally sound agriculture', 'organic farming', and 'attempts to link urban and rural areas'. Phrases such as 'rural life', 'new career in agriculture for middle-aged people and senior citizens', and 'agricultural life' are frequently used in today's media. However, it is also a clear fact that 'agriculture', 'rural life' etc. are not something easily done, even if they are easily said. One can see it in the fact that in Japan in past years organic farming has been replaced by chemical dependent farming, the number of farmers has decreased drastically and a large portion of the population has become concentrated in cities. This is the same process that can be observed today in developing countries.

As a proponent of 'agricultural life' Dr.Katsuo Ohtsuka claims it is not necessary, and indeed not possible, to lead a 100% agricultural life by devoting all one's time to agriculture. One can start by spending 1% of one's daily life in a natural environment or engaged in farming, and then gradually increase the amount of such time one spends. Everybody can start by doing whatever he or she can do. The only way for a change might be to continue to let such activities accumulate. Also, what comes to mind when considering 'agricultural life' is the question as to the necessity of international competition for agriculture, as well as 'the relationship between agriculture, environment and development'. Needless to say, Japan's paddy fields play a significant role in the soil conservation of the mountain regions, and their value cannot be measured solely in economic terms e.g. the price of rice. If the value of Japanese rice is judged only from the viewpoint of international competition, Japanese agriculture dwindles and at the same time environmental destruction continues with the significant possibility of paddy fields, forests and crop fields falling into neglect. The issue is related to the quest to find 'real affluence'. 'Breakaway strategies' such as a departure from the purely money dependent economy, self sufficiency, a gentle form of isolationism, and a withdrawal from the WTO system may be an important means for survival. Of course this situation is not relevant only to Japan. It is relevant to farmers of many developing nations who have become entangled and absorbed in the world economy by growing cash crops.

'The problems of urbanisation and rural depopulation' is another important theme. There are many causes for the depopulation in rural areas, aside from the attraction of material wealth in urban areas and the dislike of agriculture as an occupation. One of the causes might be the somehow uneasy life in rural areas, with overly close relationships with neighbours which some people might find troublesome or oppressive. On the other hand, there are many people in urban areas who wish to live in rural areas. Some people seek to become 'weekend villagers' without constantly living in a village. Of course there are also people who wish to be engaged in farming in rural areas more seriously. 'Communication between cities and villages' would be necessary to link such people to farming villages.

This new series will report on activities that pursue the coexistence of nature and humans in Japan and abroad, not only from already existing written materials but also from our actual field research. And we intend to discuss the significance and future tasks of such activities, as well as their implications for Third World development. The cases reported in this series will not necessarily be representative of their kind or very successful. Some of them may have caught our eyes purely by chance. However, isn't it true that, in a sense, everything begins with a chance encounter, some sort of 'fate'? Nothing starts without facing something new.

"I see in the future an industrial society which respects the coexistence of nature and humans, that is centred around agriculture and which encourages agricultural life. If it is impossible to create such a society of agricultural coexistence, human beings will eventually face the risk of extinction." (Dr. Katsuo Ohtsuka, Economy in the Era of Coexistence, Preface)