

Column 4 Sustainable society

Learn what just enough is—the sustainable living of the Edo period

This column describes the circular life of the pre-modern Edo period, which, as the traditional way of life in Japan, is rich in insights. Around the beginning of the period, which lasted from the early 16th century to the mid-19th century, as the depletion of forest resources and natural disasters brought about increasingly severe consequences, the *bakufu* (the national government under the shogun military leader) and *hans* (regional domains) took conservation measures, such as imposing a forest protection regulation that prohibited logging, and promoted afforestation.¹⁸⁴ For example, the Owari domain in central Japan issued a harsh proclamation known as “One tree, one head,” which translates that felling a tree without permission was punishable by death,¹⁸⁵ while in the Akita domain in northeastern Japan, the importance of conserving forest resources was emphasized under the slogan that mountains are national treasures so critical that their decline would mean the decline of the country.¹⁸⁶

According to Ishikawa Eisuke,¹⁸⁷ a researcher on the Edo period, Japan at that time was a “plant-based country” where people coexisted with and depended on plants in every aspect of life and everything was kept in circulation through processes like recycling and reuse. Nearly all goods, except those made of metal, ceramics, or stone were derived from plants, and most materials, except for lumber, were made only of plants that harnessed the energy from the sun for the past one year or two to grow. In short, virtually everything was circulated in loops. Most goods continued to be recycled without being discarded as waste, so there was a multitude of specialized recycling and reuse service providers, who constituted an industry of sorts. Among the examples of recycling and reuse service providers are: artisan merchants, including those who repaired *chochin* lanterns or locks, or replaced seal pads; specialized repairers, including tinkers, craftsmen who pieced together broken pottery parts with a special gluing technique using fire, experts in the fixing of tub and barrel hoops, menders of elevated soles of *geta* wooden clogs, mirror polishers, and millstone dressers; and recycling collectors, including those who collected paper waste, used clothes, old umbrella ribs, used barrels, or candle wax. Night soil and ashes left after the burning of plants were also collected and reused as fertilizer. As a result, the volume of domestic wastewater discharged as sewage was small. Goods were not only recycled but also were treated very carefully and reused over and over in their original form as a common practice.

While this kind of circular life does not contribute to the expansion of economic scale, the natural environment, on the whole, remained extremely stable. The Edo period was not an era when the affluence of the economy was measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). *Keizairoku* (meaning “on the political economy”), written by Dazai Shundai, a Confucian scholar in the mid-Edo period,

¹⁸⁴ See the website of the Forestry Agency (<https://www.rinya.maff.go.jp/j/kikaku/hakusyo/25hakusyo/pdf/6hon1-2.pdf>).

¹⁸⁵ See the website of the Forestry Agency (<https://www.rinya.maff.go.jp/chubu/kiso/morigatari/rekishi.html>).

¹⁸⁶ See the website of the Forestry Agency (https://www.rinya.maff.go.jp/tohoku/introduction/gaiyou_kyoku/nibetu/3_rekishi/index.html).

¹⁸⁷ Ishikawa, E. (1997), *OOEDO RISAIKURU JIJOU*, Kodansha.

observed: “Broadly speaking, *Keizai* (economy) refers to the act of governing the country. It means governing the country and saving the people.”

Presumably, the society of the Edo era was a sustainable, circular one.¹⁸⁸ Azby Brown of the KIT Future Design Institute pointed out that, in the Edo period, the swelling population could be fed with little sign of environmental degradation, partly because of the effects of technological advances and directions by the shogunate government and regional domains, but, more than anything else, it was due to a pervasive mentality of “just enough”—which propelled all of the other improvements. That mentality, which drew on an understanding of the functioning and inherent limits of natural systems, encouraged humility, considered waste taboo, and suggested cooperative solutions in a life with every individual taking just enough from the world and not more.¹⁸⁹

Transition Town—transition to a sustainable society

This column describes the Transition Town activity, which started in Totnes, a small town in Devon in South West England, in the autumn of 2005.

The Transition Town activity is a community-led grassroots movement¹⁹⁰ launched under the leadership of Rob Hopkins, a permaculture¹⁹¹ teacher, in order to deal with climate change and an energy problem known as “peak oil.” The movement aims to realize a positive transition from a vulnerable society that consumes energy on a massive scale and is heavily dependent on fossil fuels to a so-called sustainable society, which refers to a highly flexible and resilient society in which community residents collaborate and energy consumption is reduced. The movement starts with forging a common perspective on various local problems. Citizens then establish a group to plan and implement projects for a transition to a sustainable society while cooperating with various associations and institutions, including administrative agencies, companies, and universities.¹⁹²

The Transition Town activity indicates that if each and every citizen proactively puts what they can do into action with a sense of ownership while imagining a positive future and exploring resourceful ideas, the effort will lead to major change in due course. This activity is spreading to countries and regions around the world—transition communities have been created in more than 50 countries, including Japan.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ See the website of the Ministry of the Environment (<https://www.env.go.jp/policy/hakusyo/h20/html/hj08010202.html>).

¹⁸⁹ Brown, A. (2011), *EDO NI MANABU EKO SEIKATSU JUTSU* (Ikushima, S. trans.), Hankyu Communications.

¹⁹⁰ See the website of Transition Town Totnes (<https://www.transitiontowntotnes.org/about-us-2>).

¹⁹¹ Permaculture, a word coined by combining the words “permanent,” “agriculture,” and “culture” refers to a design system for creating sustainable human environments.

¹⁹² Hopkins, R. (2013), *The Transition Handbook* (Shirokawa, K. trans.), Daisan Shokan.

¹⁹³ See the website of the Rapid Transition Alliance (<https://rapidtransition.org/stories/transition-towns-the-quiet-networked-revolution/>; as of October 2019).