

Youth Environmental Advocacy

On a daily basis, we hear news sources reporting on abnormal weather with phrases like “highest ever recorded” and “record breaking.” At any given time, heat waves, torrential rains, typhoons, droughts, and other disasters are causing injuries to people somewhere in the world, throwing their life into turmoil, and even causing death. At our current level of engagement, our measures to counter global warming show no signs of being able to achieve the 1.5°C target set by the Paris Agreement, and the climate crisis continues to worsen, undermining the right of future generations to live peacefully and healthily.

At the same time, looking closer to our lives, villages are becoming depopulated, and the average age of the remaining residents continues to rise. Rural areas fall into ruin due to a lack of maintenance, creating more and more environments where only highly competitive organisms can survive. We should preserve biodiversity for the survival of humanity, but that must not be our sole purpose. We think all would be well if each individual person pursuing their dreams ultimately leads to the preservation of biodiversity.

The important things are for everyone to be actively involved and to make choices that are not only beneficial in the present but also considerate of the future of the planet. We hereby advocate for the actions and behaviors required to achieve these.

Youth Environmental Advocacy drafting members

[Advocacy in response to climate change]

Calls for government, municipalities, companies, and universities to set greenhouse gas emission reduction goals to achieve the Paris Agreement’s target of 1.5°C

If the current generation sets inadequate greenhouse gas emission reduction goals, then the next generation will be required to reduce emissions by an even greater amount to make up for it. The Japanese government and local municipalities need to raise their targets, enhance policies, and encourage large-scale emission sources (e.g., coal power generation, steel, and chemical industries) to tighten their measures. Companies and universities responsible for large emissions should also drastically improve their conduct. Measures should focus on energy conservation and fair migration toward 100% renewable energy sources instead of nuclear power; carbon capture, usage, and storage (CCUS); ammonia co-firing technologies; or other uncertain risky solutions.

Analyses conducted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show that achieving the Paris Agreement’s target of 1.5°C will require virtually zero CO₂ emissions by 2050 and a substantial reduction in other greenhouse gases as well as reduction of CO₂ emissions by roughly 50%

by 2030. The Japanese government aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 to 46 to 50% of the nation's emissions in 2013. However, according to the Climate Action Tracker, even this will fall short of achieving the Paris Agreement's target of 1.5°C. Japan's reduction target must be raised to 62%. While the actions and behaviors of the general public also play an important role, all of the households and small-to-medium-sized businesses throughout Japan together only account for 28.9% of the nation's emissions, so it is clear that reductions in this sector will not be enough to achieve a 62% reduction by 2030 or carbon neutrality by 2050.

Switching the “electricity” in our homes, schools, workplaces, and municipalities

We call on everyone to switch contracts to a power company that sells electricity generated mainly through reusable energy sources, which produce lower CO₂ emissions, pose no nuclear risk, and minimize the risk of destroying the natural environment. In addition to switching energy providers for our homes, it is also important for us to extend this to our schools, workplaces, and municipalities.

While conserving electricity on this side of the outlet is important, it is also crucial to decarbonize on the other side of the outlet. Coal-fired power generation results in dozens of times more CO₂ emissions than solar power generation in the course of producing the same amount of electricity. If power companies increase their coal-fired power generation output, then any power-conservation efforts by ordinary households to reduce CO₂ emissions will ultimately be for nothing. In Japan, there are currently 163 coal-fired power plants in operation, with another 8 being planned or already under construction.

In addition, in light of the accident at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in 2011 and the Russian military threat to the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 2022, it is evident that nuclear power poses enormous safety risks. The structural problems involved in pushing the nuclear waste burden on future generations also show no signs whatsoever of being resolved. Although renewable energy sources also raise concerns about environmental harm, their impact is vanishingly small in comparison to fossil fuels or nuclear energy. As shown by research teams at Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT and others, following comprehensive energy conservation efforts, it is both possible and realistic to meet necessary energy demands using nothing but renewable energy sources.

Shifting to a healthier, lower-carbon diet

In addition to us as individuals changing our behaviors, the government and companies should also work to re-examine environmentally harmful eating habits and promote a shift toward healthier, more sustainable food systems. While acting at the individual level to reduce our consumption of meat

(especially beef) and switch to sources of plant-based protein, reduce our usage of air-shipped foods, and aid in resolving environmental issues associated with palm oil and other materials, we also call on the government and companies to expand the scope of their efforts in these areas. The government should also consider taxing foods that impose an especially heavy environmental burden in order to curb consumption (e.g., a “meat tax”).

Food-related CO₂ emissions – from energy used in transporting and storing food, as well as due to land usage, changes in land usage, and other factors – are massive. Research has shown that approximately one-third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are due to food systems. It is well known that beef, in particular, is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions due to large methane emissions from burps and other sources. Changes in land usage for raising livestock are also causing serious harm to the natural environment. Moreover, it has become clear that reducing meat consumption not only counteracts climate change and aids in natural ecosystem conservation, but it also benefits human health. (Some have pointed out that red meat is an essential source of vitamin B12 for children.) Another issue pertains to the so-called North-South divide, in that, developed countries in North America and Europe continue to consume large quantities of meat, while consumption volumes in poor developing countries are extremely small.

- **The habit of “consciously refraining” will change the future**

We tend to feel that protecting the environment is such a huge issue that our behaviors as individuals will have no particular effect. However, this is not true. According to Oxfam, the wealthiest 10% of the world’s population generate half of all CO₂ emissions. Japanese people fall into this category as the second wealthiest population in the world after the U.S. In other words, if we change our habits and behaviors, it will have a much bigger impact on the climate crisis than we realize.

Some examples of particularly effective ways of countering climate change include reducing our use of disposable products and curbing our consumption of so-called “fast fashion,” which is mass-produced at low cost and considered problematic because we tend to discard these items after only a short period of time. We can inspire change by indirectly showing the companies producing these sorts of items that we refuse to buy products that impact the environment in harmful ways.

When it comes to using plastic bottles and packaging, we are told to “reduce, reuse, and recycle.” Of these, reducing – in other words, not using, consuming, or producing the products in the first place – lowers the impact on the environment to the greatest degree. We call on everyone to prioritize the habit of avoiding unnecessary purchases.

- **Climate Change – Education**

Our children will be even more severely affected by climate change as time passes, so it is of critical importance to educate them on the matter.

At present, classes on environmental issues have been incorporated into the curricula at elementary, junior high, and high schools. However, much more needs to be done. All children should also be taught the concept of the tipping point. Universities and vocational schools should also be required to provide classes on environmental consideration and measures to counter climate change.

In addition to students, it is also important to educate adults who are actually in positions to take action on climate change. Companies also need to take action, including actively holding in-house study sessions, in order to keep pace with the ever-changing global situation.

Our actions and behaviors tend to influence those around us. In society today, we are under the illusion that “since no one around me is taking action, climate change must not be a big problem.”

[Advocacy for preservation of biodiversity]

One of the crises over biodiversity in Japan is due a decline in human activities. This is easy to recognize if you call to mind the state of many rural areas. In the past, people participated in the agriculture and forestry industries for their livelihood, and ecosystems were regularly managed to maintain high levels of biodiversity. However, aging and depopulation in these areas have resulted in abandoned fields and untended woodlands, which have now become wastelands. When no longer managed, vegetation in these areas become so overgrown and cut off sunlight that only the most competitive creatures can survive. These changes reduce the level of biodiversity. However, if such areas are taken care of once again, it will return to being rich natural environments. Now, as in the past, there are many places in need of human attention. We are sure that if you try, you can easily recall seeing stretches of abandoned farmland near you.

So far, preserving biodiversity has been seen as an environmental issue that must be addressed for the survival of humanity – and this is of course important! However, the main purpose of preservation does not necessarily have to be to solve problems. It is fine as long as biodiversity is ultimately preserved. “I want to build a playground for children...” “I want to create a venue for community interaction...” What are your dreams? There are sure to be natural environments nearby with the potential to make your dreams come true. Let’s all make a point to enjoy the natural environment more!

More is at stake than just the so-called “great outdoors”

When we hear the phrase “preservation of biodiversity,” many of us probably envision preserving endangered species and primeval woodlands, like tropical rainforests. While these are of course also

important, at the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity held in 2010, participants set the goal of designating 17% of terrestrial and inland water and 10% of coastal and marine areas as Protected Areas. However, ecosystems are maintained by the Earth's diverse range of creatures and organisms as they influence and complement each other. This interconnectivity between all living things – from forests to oceans – is what forms the natural foundation necessary for us to live happily. This is why the concept of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM) has been attracting attention in recent years. The purpose is not to preserve the environment in these Protected Areas. Rather, with a focus on “other” areas like rural communities where people live and engage in agriculture and other production activities, the goal is to preserve regions like these as means of achieving even more effective conservation. At the COP15 held in 2021, in addition to committing to OECMs, participants also set the goal of preserving 30% of the Earth's land and sea areas critical in maintaining biodiversity by 2030.

As you can see, enriching biodiversity requires improving all environments, from the all-encompassing great outdoors to areas of nature closer to our daily lives.

Urban ecosystem conservation

Let's set aside complicated explanations for a moment to introduce some fun ways to aid in preserving biodiversity. The preservation of biodiversity is not “up to other people.” It is something that we can all do at home and in areas that have already been developed. For example, we could put flowerpots out on our balcony. We could plant plants that are native to the area, or if we live in an area surrounded by greenery or with lots of birds, we could lay down soil and leave it as it is. Wind and birds will likely bring plant seeds, which we can enjoy once they sprout. If you set out potted plants, it is a good idea to observe them closely for a while. Bees, butterflies, and various other creatures are sure to make use of them. If you put plants on your balcony that are native to the area, you will be able to create a “stopover” spot for other living things. With a little ingenuity, we are able to help restore an area's original ecosystem. If you are in school, you might even want to use this as the topic of your summertime independent research project.

Ecosystems are undergoing changes as global warming drives alpine and polar creatures out of their native regions and southern creatures to move north. Although some caution is required, enacting measures to counter climate change is another way for us to further enrich biodiversity.

Urban areas have lost many elements of nature. The wilderness in some rural areas no longer possess biodiversity due to a decline in human intervention. However, just because these have been lost is no reason to give up. Starting from these circumstances, we can begin to make changes for the better.

What we can do as consumers

As consumers, there are many things we can do, such as making a point to consume locally produced products or to purchase products with certification marks signifying that the manufacturer complies with standards and regulations. We are now surrounded by an increasing number of products that are certified and labeled as having been produced in a manner that takes biodiversity into consideration. A few examples include the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo, which indicates that any lumber used in a product is from forests that are managed and logged with consideration for the environment and local communities; the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) logo, which indicates that seafood was caught using sustainable, environmentally-friendly fishing practices designed to restore dwindling marine resources; and the Rainforest Alliance logo, which is placed on products from certified farms that meet standards related to ecosystems and pesticide management.

By making a point to choose these sorts of products, we as consumers can also play a part in supporting efforts to preserve biodiversity. Some people may be hesitant when making purchases, and if so, you might want to first look for a certification mark. Noticing these sorts of marks, logos, and seals makes us a little more aware of environmental issues, and becoming interested in these issues is an important first step. It is also a good idea to spend some time thinking about the producers who work hard toward conservation while still supporting our daily lives. Other important steps include looking beyond the packaged products and learning more about the realities of the agriculture, forestry, livestock, and fisheries industries. You could also make a habit of looking for certification marks together with your children – sort of like hide-and-seek – which they would likely enjoy. This is a way of teaching children more about the environment, and it might even inspire them to play active roles in the future. By changing our behaviors to be a bit more nature-conscious, we can help make the world we live in a much richer place.

This advocacy was written by the following members and posted after verification by other youth members.

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