

**ECO ASIA ASIA-PACIFIC ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS PROJECT,
PHASE II:
A REPORT TO THE ECO ASIA LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE
PROJECT MEETING,
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This is a report on the second phase of a multi-year project on Asia-Pacific eco-consciousness which is being carried out as a component of the ECO ASIA Long-Term Perspective Project. The topic was identified as a key area by the Working Group of the APN/START/SASCOM/GCTE Workshop on Human Dimensions Issues in New Delhi, January 1997. During the first phase in FY97, supported by APN and the National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES) in Tsukuba, Japan, our focus was on bringing together experts in the region to attend a workshop at the University of Hong Kong (UHK) in February 1998 to consider eco-consciousness from the standpoint of contemporary belief structures, traditional values and their potential for motivating positive behaviour towards the environment, content and impact analysis of the media (the press, popular journals, and television), and public opinion surveys. A selection of revised papers growing out of this workshop has been rigorously peer reviewed, and will be published in Spring 1999 as a special issue of *Asian Geographer*, a leading scholarly journal published in Hong Kong. The results of this workshop will be reported to the ECO ASIA Long-Term Perspective Project meeting in March 1999, together with the results of this phase.

Eco-consciousness—the structures of environmental knowledge (beliefs, values, and concepts) that facilitate positive human behaviour toward the environment—has rightly been identified as a critical component of the human dimensions of global change. Environmental movements have come to play a critical role in the politics of many countries in the region, and have provided a good specific focus for a policy-relevant application of principles learned in Phase I. In particular, the project seeks to examine the many assumptions regarding the *cultural* origin of the rise of environmental movements in Asian countries. Very little analysis has been done to substantiate these presuppositions and to critically examine the role of *culture* in environmental movements.

The research in this phase was directed towards assessing the transformative impact of environmental movements, especially on the cultural systems of different countries in Asia, and at considering the relationship of cultural systems and perceptions to environmental problems. For instance, environmental movements in the West have had an enormous impact on environmental attitudes and social values. While movements in Asia may possess great transformative potential, much less has been known about the implications and actual impacts of such movements on Asian cultural values systems, and hence on policy.

In the second phase, we have addressed this knowledge gap through convening a workshop sponsored by the UHK, held in Tokyo at the Shiba Prince hotel, 19-20 December 1998. The workshop was attended by 17 participants from Hong Kong, India, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam and the United States. A list of participants is attached.

This workshop investigated the role of culture and the use of cultural symbols in environmental movements in countries representing the three great macroregions of Asia: India (South Asia), Japan (East Asia) and Malaysia (Southeast Asia). It also considered approaches to determining in a scientific way the popular and elite perceptions of global and other environmental problems in all three of these regions. The workshop agenda is appended.

Our analysis suggests that understanding the values and perceptions of the general public and decision makers about the environment is critical to effective communication and action on addressing the problems of global environmental change through local action. In FY98 and FY99 we will further implement a subproject comparing environmental perceptions in diverse Asian cultural regions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The deliberations at the workshop were centered around several major findings of the project. First, Asia's environmental movements are diverse in terms of both organizational structures and their agendas. There is a diversity of social groups who have engaged in a variety of political actions, forming loose networks of diverse interest groups whose goals occasionally coincide, complement or compete with each other.

Asia's environmental movements also differ greatly in terms of the relative importance that they have assigned to "green" (nature conservation) and "brown" (pollution) issues. For instance, in Malaysia, environmental activism seems to have centered mostly around nature conservation issues and within a top-down, centralized hierarchy dominated by a few leading non-confrontational environmental groups. In India, green issues have also been given more attention and prominence than brown issues by environmental groups which operate in a more decentralized and confrontational fashion than that found in Malaysia. In Japan, both nature conservation and pollution issues have commanded attention from a multitude of local environmental movements, often based on traditional communities, that are operating with little coordination with each other at the national level.

What this all means is that while environmental movements in Asia may share similar outlooks on certain issues, their interests, motivations, and activities may not converge. This diversity of interests has led to a "contingent politics of alliance" among and within the various environmental movements, which have at times rendered environmental movement activities in each country and the region unsustainable.

Secondly, Asia's environmental movements are socially constructed and inherently political because they inevitably involve the distribution of resources among different regions and social groups. Examples cited in the case study reports on Japan, India, and Malaysia inform us that environmental activism in the region is never simply about the environment per se. In most instances, environmental activities in the region are for environmental and ecological integrity. For example, in India, environmental activism centered around the protection of natural resources is primarily driven by local people's concerns for maintaining control over the principal sources of their livelihood.

Thirdly, the successes and failures of Asia's environmental movements have to be understood within the context of their interactions with larger international institutional factors. Global

forces have played an important role in terms of both supporting and limiting the agendas and actions of local environmental groups in Asia. For example, events such as the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development have helped elevate the profiles and agendas of local environmental groups. Local environmental groups have at times been successful in mobilizing support from international organizations to combat and reverse environmentally unfriendly actions taken by their national authorities. On the negative side, local pollution problems in countries like India and Malaysia have been attributed to (non)actions of global actors such as multinational corporations.

Several major policy implications can be discerned from the above findings for donor agencies concerned with environmental protection in Asia. For instance, such agencies should be sensitized to the diversity of interests and motivations that drive environmental activism in the region. They should also be made aware of the complex dynamics between the actions taken by local groups and those of global forces. An improved understanding of the underlying complexity of environmental movements in Asia suggests that donor agencies' strategies to deal with environmental protection need to be tailored to the specifics of each country.

Another major implication of the above findings is that our understanding of eco-consciousness in the region continues to be extremely limited by lack of knowledge of the linkages between public awareness of environmental problems and social activism to protect the environment. There is a manifest need to improve our understanding of the underlying factors that have helped promote or hinder the mobilization of popular support for environmental protection measures. This in turn calls for an in-depth, comparative analysis of the public's perceptions of the environment and environmental problems in the Asia-Pacific region and how those perceptions compare with those of the scientific and policy communities.