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The Rights of Nature:
An Interview with Roderick Nash

By Murakami Asako and Richard Evanoff

Part 1

Roderick Nash is one of the foremost historians of the environmental movement in the United States and currently professor of history and environmental studies at the University of California—Santa Barbara. He was interviewed by Asako Murakami of *The Japan Times* and JEM's Richard Evanoff at the American Embassy during his visit to Japan last November. Ms. Murakami's article on Nash, "Cut Growth, Save Nature, Author Urges" appeared in the December 4, 1993 edition of *The Japan Times*.

Murakami: What are your impressions of the environmental situation here in Japan?

Nash: There seems to be a real contrast between America and Japan in the sense that NGOs here—environmental organizations, citizen environmental organizations—don't seem to be nearly as powerful and as active, as capable of moving policy, as they do in the United States. I've spent a good deal of time talking with people here about the civil rights movement in America and comparing that to the environmental movement, and contrasting that to situations in Japan. Here we had the premier leader of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr.: a citizen stands up, willing to put his life on the line, in fact gives his life for the cause, and changes the course of history. To me it's almost inconceivable that that could happen in Japan because of some of the apparently social and cultural restrictions, conventions, or mores that make it appear to the government that any sort of citizen group is in opposition to the government, whereas in the United States we would regard it as a lobby or an interest group having an input into the governing process, such as the Sierra Club, for example. Over here it seems to me that a citizen group with an environmental message is regarded as an enemy—suspicious—to be shunned, kept quiet, and not listened to. That adversarial relationship between the government and the citizen environmentalists is very unfortunate. Environmental groups are regarded as subversive to the political process rather than as people who could inform it and help shape it. The environmental movement in America is very strong and has pushed through major legislative programs regarding endangered species, clean air, clear water, and so on. Almost all of these programs have had a huge amount of citizen support.

Murakami: There used to be animism in Japan. Everything in nature—stones and plants—have souls. I think that idea still lives in Japan, but many woodlands are targeted for development. So what do you think of nature itself in Japan?

Nash: Wilderness is very important to me. One of my books is called *Wilderness and the American Mind*, which discusses American culture's relationship to wilderness. I regard wilderness as not just a recreational resource where we go and play, but a place

where we learn that we are members of a natural community, a place where we learn that we don't own nature but are part of it, a place where we learn humility, a place where we learn restraint—if only because we can't take a motorcycle through it; we have to walk through it. So we restrain ourselves physically, but also hopefully we restrain ourselves intellectually and ethically. Wilderness is an enormously important resource for environmental education, for ecological morality and environmental ethics. In Japan there is this longstanding idea going back to Shinto and Zen Buddhism that everything can be enlightened—rocks, trees, mountains, grass—all can be Buddha. That's a wonderful idea, which is very much a predecessor of ecological thinking, that everything has intrinsic value and importance for its own sake, that humans are not above and beyond the rest of nature. But I think for most Japanese that is sort of a cultural idea but it doesn't really matter too much in day-to-day life. In other words, the golf course developer isn't thinking that rocks and trees can be enlightened; he's just thinking about the yen that's going to come from his golf course. So in that sense we do not want to put too much emphasis on Shinto and Buddhist ideas, because I don't really think they are that important in our day-to-day decision-making. But it does give Japanese people an opportunity to go back and recover some cultural roots when they're building their own environmental ethics. Instead of invention, there's a certain amount of recovery.

Evanoff: There's the well-known stereotype that Japanese are in "harmony" with nature while the West has a tendency to "dominate" nature. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, however, you point out that within American culture there are actually two strands, one which does try to dominate nature but another which has a deeper appreciation for nature. How much of the latter is applicable to the Japanese experience?

Nash: Well, I think that the Japanese experience of nature has always been on a micro-level: the tea garden, the temple garden, the small, beautifully crafted bonsai type of nature where one sits and meditates on something the size of this table. And it's really admirable that people can develop a relationship with nature in that small context. It speaks to a certain inner capacity that I guess Americans haven't cultivated as much. But on the other side of that, you have a certain amount of artificiality in this landscaping relationship to nature. This is all crafted by humans; it's not wild. Even national parks in Japan are not really wild. There's a remnant of wildness in Hokkaido and a few places, but I think most of the forest cover in Japan has been replanted. Even in the national parks you have logging going on, development going on, much of the land is private, and so forth. So Japan doesn't have the resource of wilderness that it used to have. Maybe that's why when many Japanese go to the American West—Utah, Arizona, or the Grand Canyon—they think, "Wow, look at this—an area as big as Honshu and there's nothing in it." In Japan there are about 125,000,000 people in an area about the size of California. That speaks to a certain density of civilization. In a sense, the Japanese interest in miniaturization is a response to what is necessary since Japan doesn't have a Grand Canyon. Since Japan doesn't have that, you lay out a tiny little stream that trickles from here to there, and you sit and contemplate it. You don't have an alternative. It's not that Japanese don't like the Grand Canyon; it's that they don't have a Grand Canyon or an Alaska or a Yellowstone National Park. England's national parks are no different from Japan's. They also are basically just a hunk of countryside that people use. So the American experience of wilderness is quite unique, and that's something I tried to

comment on in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. What difference did the wilderness make in our self-image?

Murakami: You said that wilderness is a good place to learn about nature. But it's true that in Japan we don't have much wilderness.

Nash: (laughing) So you go to Siberia! I just talked to some people who do river trips in Siberia. Or you come to the national parks in America. Maybe there's a path which by contemplating a tea garden or a small bonsai you could come to the same conclusion. What works for me, is that I require a good deal more space.

Evanoff: How about ecological restoration?

Nash: Maybe that could happen at some places, such as Hokkaido. We could have a restoration of old growth forests and native species. But, of course, the only way to have restoration is to have something to restore. The loss of biodiversity begins to haunt us here. How are you going to restore a tropical rainforest if you lose those species? How are you going to restore the spotted owl or the passenger pigeon? We have this metaphor in English of the hot stove. You touch it and it warns you that it's hot. But if the stove is so hot that it vaporizes you, then it's pointless to have a warning. And that's what we're worried about. By the time people say, "Oops, I guess maybe we shouldn't have been doing that," then it's too late. So the hot stove only works if it doesn't kill you.

Evanoff: In your book *The Rights of Nature* there's the idea of an expanding ethical circle that includes not only human rights but also the rights of the natural environment. The concept of rights seems to be typically Western. In Japan there would probably be more of a tendency to speak in terms of obligations rather than rights. Could you comment on that difference? Do you think the concept of rights has applicability here in the context of Japanese culture?

Nash: Well, rights is one of those words which, as you recognize, in the American context is a quasi-legal idea—"Give me my rights!" But the way I use the word in the book, or when Henry David Thoreau or David Brower say "I believe in the rights of nature" or "I believe in the rights of creatures other than people," the word means more respect or reverence. Once you get above the human level we're no longer talking about freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to bear arms, etc. But we're talking about species and systems-based rights, not individual-based rights. Bears, trees, and fish do not stand up and demand their rights. In this sense the concept of rights could have some applicability to non-American contexts. If you think of rights as a vehicle through which people express concern for the natural world, rather than take it too literally, then I think the word has some usefulness.

Murakami: What can Japan do to conserve the global environment?

Nash: For one thing, begin to use an economic framework where we take into account the full range of benefits and costs that Japan is having on the global environment. There's a certain smugness among some Japanese people. They say, "Look, we're doing so well; our economy's growing at 3.5 percent per year; everybody has a TV; only a few people in the subway are homeless, and so on." But there isn't a lot of awareness that Japan is sucking in resources from the tropical forests, from the American Pacific Northwest, from the oceans, that they're sucking in whales and fish, and using an extraordinary amount of the world's resources. Japanese have to understand that they are now main players in consumerism around the world. That system of accounting where we take into consideration all our costs, all our impacts, is very important. And so is the

importance for Japan of redefining success or progress from a 3.5 percent GNP growth rate to a steady-state economy. There's a diagram I use in some of my talks which shows the growth of civilization. We start with a slow amount of growth in civilization over time. But then—let's take Japan's case—about 1945 we get this extraordinary spin up which we call “progress” or “success.” Now in a limited world, in a finite ecosystem—“spaceship Earth”—this can't continue at this rate. It's just not gonna do it! So what are the options? One that environmentalists and ecologists are warning about is collapse, pushing the system so far—in the oceans for example—that you get a collapse. Or perhaps a slower decline and fall of civilization. But the hope is that you might be able to define success not as a 3.5 percent growth in GNP—which is something like a doubling of the economy every 20 years—but as an economy that preserves the integrity, stability, and sustainability of the ecosystem. It's really odd that in so many of our activities we understand the meaning of limits. We haven't grown since we were probably 16 years old. We don't insist that we grow three more inches every year to be successful human beings. We're accustomed to reaching a certain limit and going with that limit. But in economic affairs we feel that we have to continue this growth. If every company isn't showing this upward curve, they're somehow failing. They'll replace the board of directors and get some people in who can make it go up again. What we need to do is to redefine that concept of success, and say the best managers, the best economists, the best politicians are those who don't continue this growth into a suicidal, dysfunctional range.

Murakami: Industrial countries may be able to do that, but how about the developing countries? They want to catch up.

Nash: Sure, that's what China says: we have 1.2 billion people so we have the right to pollute. They have to realize—it's not a matter of us telling them—that if they insist on that definition of success one of these scenarios may well occur and that's going to bring them down as well as everybody else. The bottom line has to be environmental health. There's no welfare without environmental welfare. There are no problems that matter without being able to live in this spaceship Earth. The brutal answer is that it's not going to be possible for 1.2 billion Chinese to live the way you do or the way I do. What really has to happen is for countries like Japan to get off the upward curve and drop back to a sustainable steady-state economy.

Evanoff: You would then see the Third World as being able to rise up to a similar level?

Nash: Right, the First World needs to drop back and the Third World can rise up a little to the point where both have sustainable economies. This is a time of decision or a crossroads that our generation is facing. With my students I use a couple of facts to illustrate how critical this time is. One is that the population of the planet will grow by 30,000 by the time we say goodbye this afternoon—10,000 an hour. And the other is that we're losing about 1,000 species a year—loss of biodiversity. You run those two curves out and you're looking at some big trouble down the line.

Evanoff: It's interesting that a lot of people still look at an infinitely growing economy as “realistic” and dismiss environmentalists as “utopian” for believing that we can go back to a steady-state economy. The opposite would seem to be the case.

Nash: For me it doesn't take a degree in economics or geography to realize that with finite resources on a finite planet, you can't keep running growth curves out indefinitely. But many people do. Personally I'm looking for a reduction in world

population—not just zero population growth but actually a turning back of world population. My biologist colleagues tell me that maybe about 2 billion human beings have a chance to live a quality life sustainably on this planet. Now we're pushing close to 6 billion and probably will hit 14 billion toward the end of the next century. Continued next issue.

Part 2

Evanoff: There's a lot of controversy on population issues, particularly between first world and third world countries—where does the decrease come about? Third world countries say that because they don't tend to have such high standards of living they don't actually contribute as much pollution. So it's not necessary for them to cut back so much.

Nash: You've got to recognize the logic of that. A Japanese or American uses something like 60 times the resources of a Somalian or a Pakistani.

Evanoff: So the argument runs that the real need for population cuts would be in the first world rather than the third world.

Nash: I'm prepared to admit that we live too luxuriously—too “high off the hog” to use an American phrase—if we use as a criteria some kind of balance with natural forces. But the loss of biodiversity in the third world, particularly in some of the tropical rainforest areas, is the one problem the future is going to be least likely to forgive us. That's irretrievable. We can either cut down population or population will face a Malthusian solution. But once a species goes, it's forever. Losing a thousand a year is kind of like popping rivets out of an airplane. You can take out a few, maybe you can take out a hundred, maybe even a thousand. But I guarantee you—I guarantee you—that there's a point at which you pop out one more rivet and the plane becomes a ground ball. And we don't know where that point is. There's an adage that we use when we're teaching people to drive: when you don't know, go slow. But we're not going slow—3.5% yahoo!

Evanoff: At this juncture, where we've got these decisions to make, realistically speaking, how adequate do you feel we'll be able to respond given the present political and economic institutions that are in place?

Nash: I don't have a great deal of confidence in the present institutional structure to really address these things. I think reform environmentalism will pick away at a few things. We have the recycling movement, for instance—people sorting out garbage. But the whole thing is to create less garbage. It's not just to sort it out, but to stop the overpackaging and the whole flow. So here's the question of whether the reform route or the more radical route is appropriate for environmental change. I personally think that we're going to go through a scenario where we're going to find some major shocks occurring to the ecosystem over the next century. There's going to be fear and that fear is going to translate into some rather radical changes, not just reform (such as when the United States and Japan get together at Rio and talk about some fairly vague environmental treaties). I think we're going to see fear leading to citizen outrage and to change. In other words I think the reform route may be too slow. We don't have time to do it that way, to change attitudes, to change ideas. I love what the Nippon Ecology Network and *Japan Environment Monitor* are doing, but do we have enough time to

reach enough people, to make a meaningful change quickly enough to pull ourselves out of the danger that we're in?

So it may be that the more radical solution is something that ought to be investigated. When you think about how paradigms have been changed in the past, often they've been changed violently and by radical means. I was reminded just yesterday that it was just a few radicals who stood tall against the old shogunate and turned things around. It wasn't that the shogunate tried to reform itself. People forced them to change. In the American Revolution a few radicals got together, stood tall—they didn't say let's compromise, let's make a deal, let's work out some reform measures. No. It was, "Give me liberty or give me death!" "No taxation without representation!" Not some taxation, not a little bit, let's talk. "No taxation without representation!" Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—and the fourth natural right, the right of revolution. If a government doesn't work to achieve the first three, then people take back their fourth right whereby they created the state in the first place and say, "Now we're going to disestablish the state and try something else." Young people of the next century are going to be saying things like, "Hey Clinton, hey Hosokawa, we're not going to wait—it's our world. We're going to take back that fourth right of revolution and we're going to change things, at our pace. We're going to change them because we think it's ethically right to do so and because we think it's prudent to do so. I see that as a major potential in the next century, and it seems to me that it has some pretty good precedents. Again, look at the civil rights movement in our country. The uncompromising stand, the radical stand. Now that one worked within the system; it didn't require a war, like the Civil War to abolish slavery or the American Revolution or the Meiji Restoration. But it did involve some uncompromising stands, didn't it? It did involve Rosa Parks just refusing to get off a bus, refusing to give up her seat. Not cutting deals the way politicians do—things like "Hey, how about two days a week, Rosa?"

I think that kind of idealism and radicalism is enormously powerful. You know, it just doesn't capture people's imagination to sort garbage and to deliver cabbages that are organically grown. I'm glad people are doing that, but that's radish environmentalism. That doesn't capture people's imagination. When people are ready to die for the environment, we're going to see some change. At one point Martin Luther King, Jr. said that if you're not willing to die for something then you haven't really committed yourself to it. We have some people in America now who are ready to die for the earth. They're climbing trees and sitting there while the lumbermen cut the trees. How far are we away from that spreading, from those people becoming cultural heroes and attracting a great deal of attention? So maybe the mechanism for change is going to come from without, rather than from within—whether to work within the system or outside it.

Evanoff: A lot of people in Japan and the United States would be shocked by this kind of revolutionary rhetoric.

Nash: Sure, and that's precisely why it's valuable. That's precisely why radical environmentalism and deep ecology is so important because it's out there at the cutting edge. On one side are the read mad-dog conservatives. These are the people who are going to go down with the ship—they have an organization called "Me First!" Then there are the business-as-usual guys—let's just show that 3.5%. Then there's the middle-of-the-road, the people. Next are the conservationists—

Evanoff: —Reform environmentalists?—

Nash: — Yes — Then out here are the radical environmentalists, the Earth First! people. These radicals and the anti-environmental people have already almost declared war on each other. So you have this pulling going on for public opinion. While the radicals are a very small group, the potential for radicals in any situation is to gain power very quickly. Let's go back to the American Revolution. In 1770 if you'd taken a barometer of public opinion and asked people, "What do you think about revolting from Britain?," people would have said, "What!? We're British you know." And six years later they're signing the Declaration of Independence. Just a handful of people pushed hard and swung middle-of-the-road opinion. The same thing in the Civil War with the abolition of slavery. We had abolitionists, people like William Lloyd Garrison, tarred and feathered, beaten by mobs. In the South? No — in the North! It must have felt very lonely in 1835 to have been William Lloyd Garrison. Four million slaves, all the infrastructure of slavery — dismantle all that, change it, because slavery's wrong? How would that even work? Thirty-five years later Garrison walks away from his print shop where he published his magazine called *The Liberator*, tosses his hat on the rack, and says, "I did it." Few reformers have the chance to make that kind of statement. The point I'm making is that these people were very few and seemed to be way out of step with the middle, but changed the paradigm.

Murakami: I think in Japan that kind of force is very weak. Do you think this can happen in Japan?

Nash: Well, I don't know a great deal about Japanese history, but I wonder if in 1865 anyone in the Japanese shogunate had said, "Oh, yeah, we're going to have a new era here." The establishment seems very strong until it begins to topple and then it goes very quickly. If you add major ecological dislocations to the work of these radicals — let's say the oceans die. "No sashimi, it's just not coming in." "But I got all this yen!" "It's just not out there, sorry we can't get it for you." Everyone begins to get skin cancer because of the ozone hole. Big ecological transformations. Alone the radicals aren't going to do it, but with fear and ecological meltdown, it might happen.

Evanoff: There seems to be a lot of ideological conflict even among radical environmentalists, between social ecologists such as Murray Bookchin and Earth First!ers like Dave Foreman. Do you feel the radical ecology movement is unified enough at this point to be able to be an effective leader in pulling society in this direction?

Nash: That doesn't bother me too much, because as I look back historically at some of the other movements, there have always been dissident voices within the radical camp and disagreements over strategy. But there's pretty much of a consensus as to where they want to go. I tend myself to side a bit more with Dave Foreman and the wild earth people. I'm sorry there's poverty, that wages are low, and people are out of jobs in the lumbering towns. But I really can't be too sorry for a species that numbers 5.6 billion and is growing at 10,000 an hour and living as well as we are. I'm sorry for spotted owls, for whales, for local forests. This is the real oppressed minority on the planet. That's what Foreman says. He says, "I agree with this stuff, but I've got a certain amount of energy and money and I'm going to put it into defending nature, not defending people." Green justice rather than social justice.

Evanoff: One of the comments made by someone from the "Wise Use" movement, which appeared on 60 Minutes a year or so ago, is that the environmental movement is a "new paganism that worships trees and sacrifices humans."

Nash: Well, of course they've been saying that for a while. You remember David Brower [founder of Friends of the Earth] was called the "arch-druid" for a while. But when you really think about it, we do have to sacrifice the human interest. That's what cutting back on economic growth involves—sacrificing the human interest on behalf of the idea of a sustainable relationship with nature. So if you use the concept of marginal evaluation—I've heard Garret Hardin, for example, say he believes that the marginal value of a redwood tree is much higher than that of a human being. One additional human being doesn't mean anything now. One additional redwood tree, one additional whooping crane or spotted owl, means a great deal. Ergo, sacrifice humans for redwood trees if necessary. Certainly don't support jobs for a tiny group of humans cutting down old growth redwood trees.

Evanoff: On the other hand, some of the social ecologists would say that you can't have any kind of protection for nature unless we radically restructure the whole economic and political system, which puts them in the very politically and economically radical camp.

Nash: Unless we restructure the whole system—capitalism and everything that goes with it? I don't know if I'm prepared to throw out capitalism completely, but certainly the concept of ownership that goes with capitalism—ownership of things, particularly of nature—has to be rethought. We don't own the earth, any more than we own slaves. We gave up the idea of slavery, of owning human beings. People still work their asses off, but their rights are respected. Use without abuse. Workers now still work on the southern fields and pick cotton. But they're not whipped and beaten, their families destroyed, abused sexually and so forth. They have some rights; they have some respect. The capitalistic idea of owning the earth, buying it and then saying I can do with it what I want to, I think has to be replaced by a concept that maybe it's OK to have personal property, to own, say, this tape recorder and if you want to pour sand on it or throw it in the bathtub or whatever, that's your business. You can destroy it. But you can't use that same concept of ownership, it seems to me, to apply to a marsh or wetlands. That's not something you can own in the same way that you can own a tape recorder. We have to begin to recognize that. And that does cut out a large part of the heart of real estate, capitalism, buying and selling land, that kind of stuff. There are many people now in the radical environmental movement who say that we're talking about the enslavement of the earth, just as we once talked about buying and selling human beings, the enslavement of people. The expansion of liberation or of natural rights . . . there's tremendous energy in this concept in America. It's like the energy of an atom, just awesome in its power. The idea of liberation from tyranny is a concept that Americans really get into, to free something from tyranny. When you link that traditional natural rights rhetoric to nature, you develop this powerful potential for transforming the environmental movement from an economic basis to an ethical basis. There's a potential there for this to capture people's minds and enthusiasm.

Books by Roderick Nash

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