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ecoLogic

The Same Old Story

by Richard Evanoff

Over dinner one evening environmental journalists Midori and Hugh Paxton remarked that every environmental story they write is essentially the same — only the governments, corporations, and locations change. It must be easy to become an environmental journalist, I thought: all you have to do is to write your first story, then plug in different names, dates, and places to customize it for each particular situation. Writing environmental stories is just like writing formula fiction. While the monotonous similarities may make for boring reading, they do have the advantage of highlighting the common forces at work in nearly all environmental problems. Once we understand the underlying formula, we can easily get a handle on any particular environmental problem we encounter.

The scene: The story opens with a viable ecosystem. It doesn't have to be an enchanted forest or a breathtaking mountain vista. Any viable ecosystem will do. The essential element is not that the area is idyllic, only that it is "normal." It's basically doing well on its own without any outside interference. Each species contributes to the well-being of the other species around it. If humans are present, they have an essentially symbiotic relationship with their surroundings, meaning that they either enjoy them for their own sake or use the resources of the ecosystem in a sustainable way. The environmental story is sometimes set in exotic locations, such as Malaysia where the rainforests are being destroyed for export timber or Antarctica where first ozone hole was discovered. But there are also "regional" settings closer to home, such as Ishigaki where airport construction threatens a coral reef or Nagano where the mountains will be cleared to make ski slopes for the Winter Olympics.

The characters: While the inhabitants of the ecosystem, both human and nonhuman, happily go about their daily business, secret schemes are being hatched in faraway places. The principle schemers are big corporations, developers, and real estate agents who are always dreaming up new ways to increase their profits. The schemers know that destroying the environment is big business. Building a dam on the Nagara River is more profitable than preserving the area as a wetland. Constructing golf courses on forested land is more lucrative than preserving it as a wilderness area.

The second set of characters in most environmental stories are government officials. With few exceptions, the government is basically on the same side as the big corporations, and the relationship between them is usually quite cozy. The government and corporations often take turns scratching each other's backs. Politicians get funding for

election campaigns from corporations; if a corporation later needs a law passed or legal permission to "develop" a certain ecosystem, government officials will usually oblige them.

The third set of characters in most environmental stories are the local citizens. The citizens divide into two unequal groups: a vocal minority who are basically aware of what's going on and who attempt to fight back, and a silent majority who are basically ignorant of the issues involved and often too busy with other things to care. Corporations and the government know that they will never be able to recruit members of the first group as potential allies. But since they can only maintain credibility by acting "in the name of the people," they work really hard to bring the second group over to their side. Corporations do this by saying that ecological devastation is necessary in order to "create jobs" for local citizens. Politicians do this by promising a rosy technological future which will bring material prosperity and luxury for everyone. Whether gullible or not, most people believe more in the glitz and glitter promised by the corporations and politicians than the simple living and high thinking advocated by environmentalists. Without money, political clout, or widespread public support, the environmental minority stands like David before the Goliath of big business and government with only a few pebbles of ecological foresight in hand.

The plot: As my high school lit teacher told me, every good story has to have conflict, which is either between humans and nature, humans and humans, or humans and themselves. Environmental stories have all three types. The conflict between humans and nature is obvious. Human beings now have the technological capacity to destroy any ecosystem on earth they want to, in fact to destroy the entire earth. The conflict between humans and humans has the companies and government on one side shamelessly raping Mother Earth to maintain high profits and a growing GNP. While the majority of citizens retreat behind closed shutters, the only character with guts enough to stand up and fight are the ecological minority who believe that it is possible to have a safe, sane, and sustainable lifestyle only by reining in unbridled growth and the ecological devastation which results. The inner conflict between humans and themselves involves the question: What are you going to do about it? Or as Arlo Guthrie sings, "Which side are you on?"

The ending: One thing all environmental stories do not necessarily share, however, is the same ending. Sure, in the majority of cases the government and corporations end up getting their way. Trees will be cut to make ski slopes for the Nagano Olympics with government support, at the taxpayers' expense, and to the construction companies'

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profit. Despite some recent setbacks, it's likely that the high speed maglev train will eventually cut a swath of ecological death all the way from Tokyo to Osaka, increasing property taxes for ordinary citizens who live along the route and increasing profits for the real estate speculators who are only too happy to drive up land prices (all with government complicity of course).

But there's another possible ending, one that only we ourselves can write: We can wake people up to the fact that it's only a small minority which ultimately benefits from clearcutting the forests, destroying the landscapes, building the projects. They are not concerned about creating a better society but in taking whatever they can get and leaving the rest of us with high taxes, unemployment, deteriorating inner cities, and environmental destruction. For the majority it's in our long-term interest to see that we build a society based on ecological sustainability and the satisfaction of genuine human needs — not on profits, greed, and extravagance. By coming out from behind the closed shutters of apathy and narrow self-interest we can face down the corporate bosses and their political cronies. The end of the story belongs to us. □

Utonai, from p. 20

With the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention coming up next June, increased international attention is being paid to the Lake Utonai issue. The participants in the Asian Wetland Symposium (see last issue) visited the site on the way to the symposium's second venue at Kushiro, and the issue was discussed during the Symposium, while information has been distributed in English by the WBS-J and Professor Ono of Hokkaido University.

Sustained pushing will probably be required to get the authorities to recognize that their plan is a crock and needs to be scrapped, not changed a little. If the issue follows precedent, the Hokkaido Development Agency will probably work out an alternative route that will not be so obviously destructive of the Lake Utonai system and dig their heels in on that. If we are lucky they will perhaps throw in a few token artificial ponds in the plains around the Chitose River, which they can then trumpet as progressive wetland restoration.

It will be interesting to see how the Wild Bird Society of Japan would then react. WBS-J has come under criticism in the past for being too weak-kneed when it comes to opposing development. However, it will not

be able to settle for any compromise that will actually affect the Lake Utonai system. As L. K. Caldwell says in *Between Two Worlds* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), "Social consensus, implicit or explicit, governs what individuals may do, but the possibilities inherent in nature determine what may be done... basic relationships between man and nature are not negotiable. Nature does not bargain, and the biosphere is not a marketplace." If WBS-J does accept a compromise that ends up degrading Lake Utonai and its Sanctuary, its credibility as a nature conservation organization will evaporate. However, if a Channel route can be established that will demonstrably not affect the wetland, it will be close to impossible for WBS-J to effectively oppose it.

With the assistance of other wetland conservation proponents, such as the Wetland Coalition '93, the Japan Wetland Action Network, and international organizations such as the Asian Wetland Bureau and the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau, whose directors attended the Symposium in August and visited the site, an outcome better than the one predicted above, including replacement of the Channel with more benign alternatives, might be just possible. Or at least we would like to think so. □