

Introduction

Environmental history in this volume explores the relationship between the natural world and people, and how it has changed over time. It is a story of how human beings have thought about, managed, used, and tried to preserve nature, and how the natural environment has been affected by human behavior. The focus here is largely on the modern history of Japan; as such, the essays speak to, and can thus be incorporated into teaching about, some of the main concerns of modern Japanese history: efforts in the late 1800s to craft a modern, national identity; conceptions of modernity expressed in ideas about space, technology, and science; the costs of industrialization; the workings of democratic politics and civil society; the complicated relationship between Japan and the U.S. in the postwar period; and the enduring legacies of this past.

Three themes about the relationship between the natural world and people are woven throughout this introduction and the essays that follow. First, people have in various ways and at various times sought to control, manage, and harness nature. From the manipulation and conquest of the natural and built environments of the northern island of Hokkaidō in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the belief in the human capacity to render nuclear power completely safe in the 1950s and beyond, people have been convinced that they can triumph over nature in a variety of ways.

Second, these actions have revealed the extent to which humans can indeed alter the environment and, in many cases, not necessarily for the good of the natural world or its people. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), effluent from the Ashio Copper Mine poisoned the Watarase and Tone rivers northwest of Tokyo and contaminated land in Tochigi and Gunma prefectures. In the 1950s, effluent from the Chisso Corporation poisoned Minamata Bay and the Shiranui Sea, contaminating local fishing communities on the southern island of Kyūshū and causing Minamata disease. Japanese became aware in the 1950s and 1960s of other diseases that resulted from environmental pollution, such as Itai-Itai disease caused by cadmium released by mining companies that poisoned the ecosystem of Toyama prefecture in western Japan for decades. Furthermore, air pollution from the port of Yokkaichi in the southeastern prefecture of Mie during the 1960s and 1970s caused various pulmonary illnesses, including what was called Yokkaichi asthma. In addition to these “pollution diseases,” the manmade environmental degradation that was one of the many side effects of the U.S. military’s large presence on the main island of Okinawa has harmed its natural world in the postwar period. And the environmental and human devastation caused by the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in March 2011 was the result of both environmental triggers and human failure.

Third, people have resisted and tried to prevent such environmental degradation. Be it efforts to preserve the culture of the indigenous Ainu of what became known as Hokkaidō, attempts to forestall state control of nature, criticism of nuclear weapons, challenges to nuclear power, or legal campaigns pursued by the victims of Minamata disease, human destruction of the natural environment and people’s lives has provoked human opposition and activism.