

Environmental Sustainability in Japan

Asian Studies/Environmental Studies 277

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All pictures at ARI. Top to bottom: Store & Office, Greenhouses, Dining Hall Koinoia, Men's Dormitory, Pig Sty

Why go to Japan to study environmental sustainability?

Anthropologist Mark Hudson, in an upcoming *Journal of Asian Studies* roundtable, challenges the tendency of some Americans and Europeans who turn to Asian societies with hope – think of “deep ecology” advocates who look to Daoism or Buddhism in quest of “superior” foundations for their ecological ethics. They think that Asians’ distinctive philosophical traditions, combined with their millennia-long experiences of human transformation of the natural world, leave Asians well positioned to offer new solutions to our global environmental challenges. Hudson argues that Japan offers distinctive models of resilience, if not pure nature and superior environmentalism.

Historian Robert Stoltz ([Bad Water: Nature, Pollution and Politics in Japan, 1870-1950](#)) would answer the question differently, perhaps by inviting us to visit the places that inspired 19th and 20th century Japanese environmentalists to cooperate with workers in building a “creative and provocative tradition” of combating corporate and state actors involved in perpetrating environmental degradation.

We can find a third set of answers in contemporary environmental practice at small Japanese farms and in Japanese universities, which turn to locally grounded coalitions that remain attentive to global discourse, developments and science.

If you join the course, you will pursue all three types of answers, balancing them against your personal experiences of living on an organic farm, visiting locally significant sites in Japan’s environmental history, and meeting Japanese university students and professors for direct conversation and exchange of ideas.

Course goals

This course will introduce you to ideas and practices of community leadership around environmental sustainability in Asia. You will learn how Japanese communities provide answers to global environmental challenges, countering the popular image in the US that Asia’s relevance rests mostly as a source of environmental problems. We will focus on the ways that community involvement and civic engagement support environmental sustainability in Asia. In order to meet that goal, we will partner with a local institution with deep community roots and broad global connections: the Asian Rural Institute.

Where will we go? And what will we do?

We will spend most of our time based at the [Asian Rural Institute \(ARI\)](#) in Nasushiobara, Tochigi Prefecture (100 miles north of Tokyo). From March-December every year, for the past forty years, ARI trains leaders from rural communities around the world (in Asia, Africa and lately, Latin America) in sustainable, organic agriculture. Motivated by Christian faith, but open to persons of all faiths (or none), ARI strives to “build an environmentally healthy, just and peaceful world, in which each person can live to his or her fullest potential.”

We will take advantage of ARI's January off-season to enjoy their classroom and dormitory facilities. You will be able to meet and learn from their staff and long-term volunteers during several guest lectures and shared discussions. While the training program is off-season, the farm continues to operate as a sustainable community, so every day we will join in the "Foodlife" practices that make ARI a special place (chores on the farm and in the kitchen). Our goal is to study ARI's environmental sustainability practices and how they relate to the broader environmental and social contexts in Japan and the countries from which trainees and volunteers come. 90-minute class sessions will take place two or three days every week.

We will make one or two day trips every week to sites such as neighboring farms and agriculture-related organizations and co-operatives (both organic and not); the Ashio Copper Mine central to the history related in Stoltz's book; and the nearby Nikko National Park.

We will also spend some four nights as a group away from ARI. Two of them will be in Tokyo, at the beginning of our trip, so you can experience the urban environment in which two-thirds of the Japanese population lives. Two more nights will be spent in another rural location (likely to be Nagano Prefecture, but may be Niigata Prefecture) to provide contrast and the opportunity to attend a winter festival. You will all also have one free weekend to travel wherever you wish (some additional expenses likely).

Another highlight of our class will be the chance to interact with Japanese university students and their professors. We will invite participants from Japanese university programs pursuing innovative community projects related to environmental sustainability to join us for a two-day workshop.



How will I be graded?

I will grade you on four types of work (each at 25% of course grade): Participation in daily Foodlife work, field trips, class discussions, and the workshop; Daily reflection journal responding to prompts based on readings, lectures and class events; Open-ended interview with an ARI staff member; and Integrative essay.

Readings include the Stoltz book, the special *Journal of Asian Studies* roundtable, chapters in [Japan at Nature's Edge: the Environmental Context of Global Power](#), and materials from ARI.