



Excerpt from the Forward to *Just Enough*

Japanese society once faced the prospect of collapse due to environmental degradation, and the fact that it did not is what makes it such an instructive example. Japan entered the Edo period in 1603 facing extreme difficulties in obtaining building timber, suffering erosion and watershed damages due to having clear-cut so many of its mountains for lumber, and virtually unable to expand agricultural production to the degree necessary to feed a growing population. The needs of the urban population, particularly those of the capital city of Edo, but also those of Osaka, Nagoya, and numerous other growing cities, conflicted with those of the rural areas, and the life of farmers was made all the more difficult by their legal obligation to surrender one-third or more of their harvest to support the warrior classes.

In terms of environment and natural resources, Japan was both challenged and blessed. The archipelago is extremely mountainous, and arable land is limited to a handful of broad coastal plains and many narrow mountain valleys, amounting to only about one-fourth of the nation's land area. At the start of the Edo period, nearly all of the potentially arable land had already been opened to cultivation and was feeding, just barely, a population of about twelve million. Agricultural land in many areas was showing signs of exhaustion and degradation, and output was declining. But the country benefits from a temperate climate and warm ocean currents, and it is blessed with abundant rainfall and a long growing season. Freshwater from snowmelt is generous and fast-flowing, and the extensive watersheds drain into innumerable fertile river valleys and wetlands. The virgin forest that originally covered the mountains of the archipelago was extensive and diverse in both broadleaf and coniferous species, and it provided an extremely rich habitat in which all manner of flora and fauna flourished. Nature itself had endowed



Nagasawa Rosetsu, *Nachi Waterfall* (detail), approx. 1789–1799, hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 66 1/2 × 19 in (168.9 × 48.3 cm). Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, Transfer from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Ney-Wolfskill Fund (B69D47).



A World of Edo Art Environment

Japan well for human habitation, but by the early 1600s the land was suffering from overexploitation by the large population.

All the more remarkable, then, that two hundred years later the same land was supporting thirty million people—two and a half times the population—with little sign of environmental degradation. Deforestation had been halted and reversed, farmland improved and made more productive, and conservation implemented in all sectors of society, both urban and rural. Overall living standards had increased, and the people were better fed, housed, and clothed, and they were healthier. By any objective standard, it was a remarkable feat, arguably unequaled anywhere else, before or since.

The success can be credited partly to technological advances and partly to government direction. Agricultural breeding played a part, as did improved hydrology. Design was crucial, as was the timely collection and distribution of information. But more than anything else, this success was due to a pervasive mentality that propelled all of the other mechanisms of improvement. This mentality drew on an understanding of the functioning and inherent limits of natural systems. It encouraged humility, considered waste taboo, suggested cooperative solutions, and found meaning and satisfaction in a beautiful life in which the individual took just enough from the world and not more. The stories in this book describe many of the more remarkable technical aspects of life during this period, as well as relevant social, political, and economic factors, but their real purpose is to convey this mentality of “just enough” as it guided the daily life of millions throughout the society.

Brown, Azby. Excerpt from “Forward.” In *Just Enough: Lessons in Living Green from Traditional Japan*, 9–10. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2009.