

History of Ecohealth Research in Japan

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In the second half of the 19th Century, the concept of hygiene and sanitation was introduced to Japan by the Meiji Restoration government. Together with the modern health and nutrition concept it helped to establish a Western-style nation state in Japan. The government promoted hygiene, sanitation, and the health of people mainly in urban areas as a part of the modern management system of the state. With the emergence of mining and other various industries, however, there occurred many environmental health problems in Japan. Especially with the rapid economic boom after World War II, Japan experienced many environmental and environmental health problems (公害) such as the Minamata disease (methyl-mercury pollution/poisoning), the Itai-itai disease (cadmium pollution/poisoning) and the Yokkaichi asthma (air-pollution of industrial origin). These were serious side-effects of industrialization and modernization. Pollution of soil, water and air became a social problem. To conserve natural environment and restore healthy urban environment was the national concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Japan Environment Agency was established in 1971 and became the Ministry of the Environment from 2001. At that time the movement of environmental health was at the peak. With these experiences, some human ecologists and public health specialists in Japan started to think about the necessity of a more integrated approach to the environment-lifestyle/livelihood-health complex, ecohealth.