

Newspaper's Role and Limitations in Environmental Reporting Case Study: Isahaya Bay Land Reclamation Project Issue

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Public concern with environmental degradation, and environmental coverage by the media in Japan, began with the outbreaks of severe pollution problems in the mid-1950s. This media coverage and public concern evoked by pollution problems led to the enactment of a series of pollution control laws since 1971. In recent years, public works in Japan have become a major issue in environmental conservation, as they are often large-scale, involve large governmental funding, long-term planning and establishment, unpleasant conflict among people in the area, and above all irreversible effects on the natural environment.

Since World War II, Japan has eagerly carried out large-scale development projects for housing, industry and agriculture. Gaining land by reclaiming shallow inland seas and bays has been a conventional measure for its cost and technical merits. However, early practices in such projects often failed to either make a profit or abide by environmental standards. The Isahaya Bay land reclaiming project in Nagasaki prefecture was a good example of one of those projects. It was planned decades ago and despite its shortcomings, still exists. On April 14, 1997, one third of the bay was finally enclosed. Media coverage was intense for about a month from May to June, but gradually ceased. No change to the project has been made since then, although its completion has been delayed.

The media's role in society is complex. It is not easily determined what exactly the media contributes to society, or whether they actually possess the power to change the direction of public opinion and political action. National newspaper coverage of the Isahaya Bay Land Reclamation issue did trigger public mobilisation in support of conservationists, and yet by itself was incapable of influencing the established decision.

This paper looks at Japanese newspapers' coverage of environmental issues, and examines their approach to, and roles in, reporting environmental problems. The interaction of both newspapers and environmental groups was also investigated. For newspapers, the environmental groups are a source of news, and for environmental groups, newspapers are vehicles to publicise their opinion and to add legitimacy to their views. Although some of the media campaigns against industries and government authorities have had successful consequences, it is often said that the media's power by itself cannot significantly change the course of government decisions once made. In order to determine the real role of media involvement in environmental issues and what else is needed to gain a successful resolution for an environmental dispute, this research examines newspaper coverage of the Isahaya Bay Land Reclamation Project issue as a case.