

# The Modern Evolution of Environmentalism: The Case of Korea, 1960~1989

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## <Contents>

<b>I. Introduction</b>	5. Living Environment
<b>II. The Environmental Problems of Korea</b>	6. Forestation
1. Natural environmental hazards	7. Environmental Movement
2. Nuclear Power	8. Environmental Policy
3. Water Pollution	<b>III. Conclusion</b>
4. Air Pollution	

## I. Introduction

This paper is aimed to observe the evolution of social consciousness in environmental awareness and the developmental phases of measures to protect the environment in Korea. The study in this paper covers the last three decades (1960~1989). During that time, Korean society has moved from a state of absolute poverty to that of the wealth associated with industrialization. Korea has thus been transformed into one of the most prominent newly industrializing countries in the world.

The successful industrialization of Korea was the product of the economic growth first movement. At that time, there was next to no social perception of the possible detrimental environmental effects of the industrialization and its concomitant urbanization.

Fortunately, however, the situation has been constantly changing over the last thirty years. As the per capita income rose with the increasing industrialization, the environment was more and more adversely affected: people began to see their daily lives directly threatened.

It seems meaningful and important to observe the evolution of social consciousness in environmental awareness and the developmental phases of measures to protect the environment for two main reasons. Firstly, though the environment has been severely affected, economic growth has been unprecedented in the world. Secondly, awareness of environmental problems has surged in the last few years. Korea has learned about environmental

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policy from western countries. However, in the West, environmental consciousness spreads only after industrialization. It is therefore of interest to study the case of Korea where consciousness is RAPIDLY growing even under on-going industrialization.

In an effort to study the environmental situation, the development of remedial measures and people's awareness of the situation, I have chosen to make a study of environmental editorials which appeared in the Choson Ilbo daily newspaper. Considered Korea's leading daily newspaper, the Choson Ilbo has the largest circulation. These editorials have appeared over the last thirty years, from 1960 to 1989 and I have chosen to analyze them by making use of content analysis.

## II. The Environmental Problems of Korea

There have been 385 editorials concerning the environment printed in Choson Ilbo daily newspaper between 1960 and 1989; this means about 13 articles a year. Considering these articles according to decades, we find the following distribution: 217 articles, 56.3% in the 1970s; 102 articles, 26.5% in the 1980s; and only 26 articles, 17.2% in the 1960s (see Table 1).

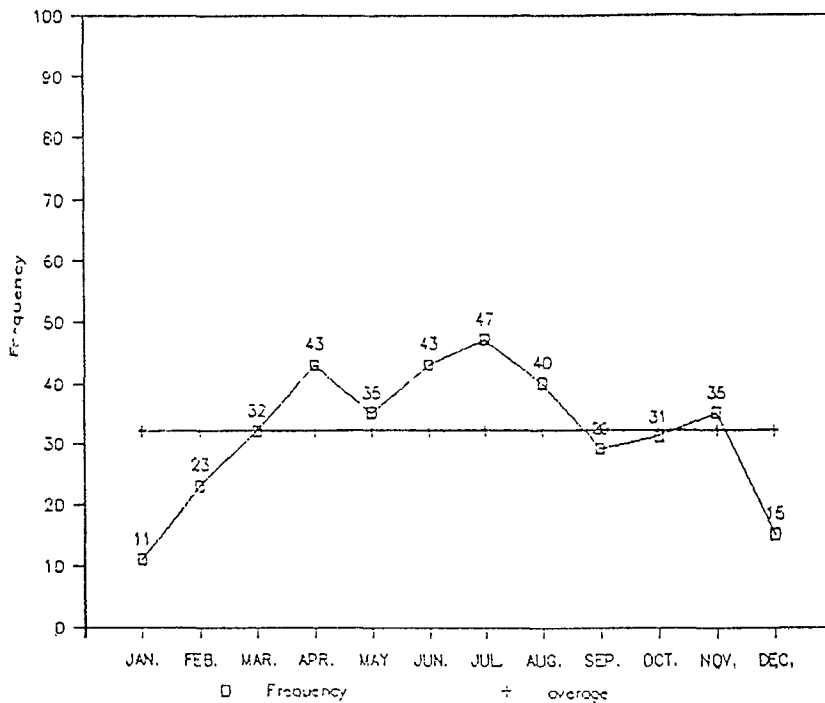


Fig. 1. Number of Editorials by Month, 1960~1989

The rarity of environmental articles in the 1960s was due to the importance placed on economic growth. There was, therefore, almost no room for the consideration of environmental policy. In 1962, when the government began the policy of economic growth first movement, factories were encouraged by the government development policy. A few years later, when polluting smoke began being emitted into the surroundings, all the media and the voice of the people considered smoke to be a symbol of prosperity instead of a danger to their habitat. This changed in the 1970s as awareness of the effect of economic success on the environment grew.

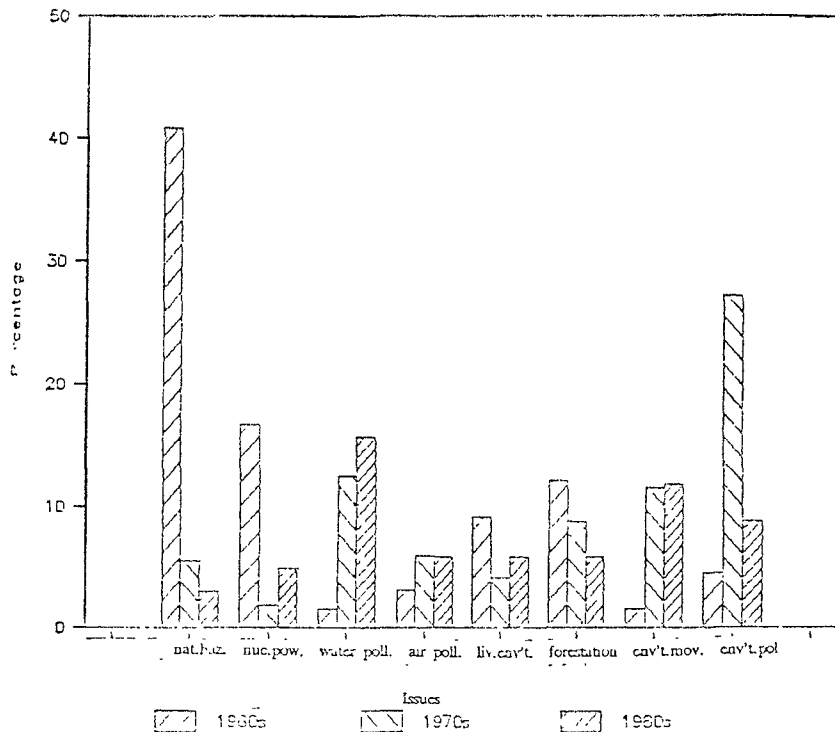
Considering the general trend of the printing of these 385 environmental editorials according to months and seasons (see Figure 1), we find that in July, environmental matters were handled most frequently. Also from April to August, both before and after July, 53.9% of the editorials were published in a space of five months. However, in January and December the lowest proportion of articles appeared. It seems that environmental subjects were also in hibernation in the winter months! In the spring and autumn, often the same subjects would be covered again and again.

**Table 1.** Number of Editorials by Issue and Decade, 1960~1989

Issues	Decade			
	1960s	1970s	1980s	Total
natural environmental hazards	27(40.9)	12( 5.5)	3( 2.9)	42(10.9)
nuclear power	11(16.7)	4( 1.8)	5( 4.9)	20( 5.2)
water pollution	1( 1.5)	27(12.4)	16(15.7)	44(11.4)
air pollution	2( 3.0)	13( 5.9)	6( 5.9)	21( 5.5)
ocean pollution	0( 0.0)	8( 3.7)	3( 2.9)	11( 2.9)
soil pollution	1( 1.5)	5( 2.3)	3( 2.9)	9( 2.3)
garbage and toxic waste	0( 0.0)	3( 1.4)	1( 1.0)	4( 1.0)
miscellaneous pollution	1( 1.5)	3( 1.4)	7( 6.9)	11( 2.9)
environmental health hazards	0( 0.0)	5( 2.3)	3( 2.9)	8( 2.1)
industrial hazards	2( 3.0)	5( 2.3)	1( 1.0)	8( 2.1)
living environment	6( 9.1)	9( 4.1)	6( 5.9)	21( 5.5)
energy-resources	0( 0.0)	12( 5.5)	3( 2.9)	15( 3.9)
population	0( 0.0)	5( 2.3)	1( 1.0)	6( 1.6)
urban landscape beautification	1( 1.5)	0( 0.0)	5( 4.9)	6( 1.6)
forestation	8(12.1)	19( 8.8)	6( 5.9)	33( 8.6)
natural landscape conservation	2( 3.0)	3( 1.4)	12(11.8)	17( 4.4)
environmental movement	1( 1.5)	25(11.6)	12(11.8)	38( 9.9)
environmental policy	3( 4.6)	59(27.2)	9( 8.8)	71(18.4)
Total	66(100%)	217(100%)	102(100%)	385(100%)

Classifying the 385 editorials according to subject: 1) environmental policy, 18.4%; 2) water pollution 11.4%; 3) natural environmental hazards, 10.9%; 4) environmental movement, 9.9%; 5) forestation, 8.6%; 6) air pollution, 5.5%; 7) living environment, 5.5%; 8) nuclear power, 5.2%; 9) natural landscape conservation, 4.4%; 10) energy resources, 3.9%; 11) ocean pollution, 2.9%; 12) miscellaneous pollution, 2.9%; 13) soil pollution, 2.3%; 14) environmental health hazards, 2.1%; 15) industrial hazards, 2.1%; 16) urban landscape beautification, 1.6%; 17) population, 1.6%; 18) garbage and toxic waste, 1.0% (see Table 1).

Looking into the percentage of specific environmental subjects handled on a year-long basis in the editorials, we find two interesting tendencies. There were eight important environmental subjects which received more than 5% attention. Among them, natural environmental hazards and forestation have received a lower percentage of coverage than water pollution, air pollution, and the environmental movement which have become more popular subjects since the 1960s (see Fig. 2). I have chosen to study eight important environmental issues in modern Korean society.



**Fig. 2.** Changes in the Importance\* of Eight Environmental Issues, 1960~1989 (in percentage)

\*It denotes the ratio of number of editorials dealing with the respective environmental issue to the total number of editorials in each decade.

### 1. Natural environmental hazards

Natural environmental hazards have been of major importance in environmental matters in Korea. Among the total number of 42 editorials on natural environmental hazards, drought (19 articles) and flood damage (17 articles) were mostly frequently written about; the remaining articles being about unusual meteorological phenomena like typhoons, heavy snowfalls, and damages from cold weather.

Man-made as well as natural environmental hazards were especially frequent in the 1960s in Korea. Many people died and agriculture suffered great losses. Due to shortage of dam construction, and lack of tree planting, floods and droughts all caused great damage.

When reforestation of the peninsula had been completed, and the flow of rivers and dams had begun to be controlled, natural environmental hazards no longer affected Korea on an annual basis. As a result of these measures, the number of editorials written about environmental hazards was reduced to 12 articles in the 1970s and just 3 articles in the 1980s.

### 2. Nuclear Power

Over the last three decades, awareness of the dangers of nuclear power has greatly changed. When the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union was at its peak in the 1960s, the attitude of Korean society was clearly geopolitical and depended on the U.S.A.'s nuclear umbrella. For example, the editorials were critical of the nuclear tests run by the Soviets, all the while justifying the tests done by the U.S. as rightful and necessary.

True to the economic euphoria of the 1960s, Korea welcomed atomic energy research because it was indicative of technological advancement. The Korean people underlined the fact that the energy was to be used for peaceful purposes only. At the same time that they welcomed this newly found power, the newspapermen did not hesitate to remind the people of the many victims of the atomic bombs dropped in the Second World War.

However, there was a fundamental change in viewpoint in the 1970s. Korea welcomed the advent of the atomic power plant age in 1978, all the while cautioning against nuclear tests in both the East and the West. No precautions against atomic accidents in power plants were taken at all; the only worry the government had was the inevitable dependence on foreign countries for nuclear fuel.

Until the first half of the 1980s, the Cold War continued to be a major influence on the development of nuclear power. The Soviet's suggestion to reduce nuclear weapons was met

with caution; their motives were mistrusted. In the latter half of the 1980s, attitudes began to change. Negotiations between America and the Soviet Union began to be taken at face value. Domestic nuclear power began to be considered in a different light: Korea began to worry about the possible leakage of radioactive rays, demanding safety measures to be taken.

### **3. Water Pollution**

Out of various pollutions, water pollution was the subject most frequently written about in the editorials; there were 44 articles altogether. The reason for the great interest in water pollution was that it was directly connected with the survival of the people and also it is a very visible form of pollution. The situation surrounding water pollution was treated very gravely. One article, for example, was entitled: If the rivers rot, our blood will rot (July, 6, 1986).

It was in the 1960s that concern for water pollution was first written about. The article dealt with the severe pollution of the Han River, a river which flows through the center of Seoul. Suddenly, due to pollution, the people could no longer swim in the river in the summer. The article deplored this.

After the 1970s, when some of the effects of industrialization were beginning to be felt, the pollution of water began to be most remarkably noticeable and so became an issue. There was special focus on the Han River problem, caused by the huge concentration of industry and urban development in Seoul. Among the 44 articles on water pollution, there were 12 on the Han River.

### **4. Air Pollution**

When the government-encouraged factories began to belch polluting gases into the air in the early 1960s, public opinion considered the smoke a symbol of prosperity. Even more so, cars, the main culprits of air pollution, were never seen from any other angle at that time than as symbols of success.

Here also, interest in air pollution was only shown after the 1970s. Then people began to realize the damage caused to the environment by cars. Of the 21 editorials to appear on air pollution, 11 were concerned with the pollution caused by harmful vehicle fumes.

In Korea, nitrogen oxides from vehicles and sulfur oxides from burning briquettes are the main cause of acid rain. Even though the research done on acid rain has been neither extensive nor conclusive, it has been a constant phenomenon since 1975. The subject of acid rain was not missed by the writers of the editorials.

Another aspect of air pollution is the creation of smog which limits city visibility and causes eye trouble. In 1988 in particular, smog was very serious, and Seoul city visibility was limited to less than one kilometer. The writers of the editorials considered the smog so serious that they said that "the city of Seoul was not visible."

### **5. Living Environment**

Living environment is a term that I have coined to encompass the conditions of daily life including health, safety, and comfort. There were 21 articles among the editorials on this subject. To classify them specifically, there were 10 articles on sanitation, 4 articles on law and order on public holidays, 3 articles on city parks, 3 articles on food safety, and 1 article on urban amenity.

The major subjects considered in the articles on sanitation were contagious diseases and briquette gas poisoning (or anthracite gas poisoning). Considering the climate of Korea, the former cause social problems in summer, the latter is the source of disaster in winter. The use of charcoal briquettes contributed positively to the success of the reforestation program. However, people from low income brackets could not afford to install proper safety devices, and so lost their lives from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Editorials on sanitation were featured less and less as the years went by. There were 6 articles in the 60s, 3 articles in the 70s, and only 1 article in the 80s. From this we can perceive the trend in living conditions. While the quality of the natural environment deteriorated with economic growth, living conditions improved.

Holiday making is also an outcome of improved economic conditions. As more and more people acquired the leisure to go out and enjoy free time, the problems relating to holidays arose. The whole system of creation and management of city parks had to be looked at.

The problems associated with food safety are fundamentally a question of social ethics. Merchants spurred on by greed and the desire for personal gain are willing to cheat the public in falsely promising healthy food.

### **6. Forestation**

Forestation was the foremost goal of the conservation movement in modern Korea. During the Japanese colonial period, the deforestation inflicted was almost total. After liberation, an Arbor Day, in April 1, was quickly designated in order to give the impetus to start planting trees all over the country. At first, however, due to the cutting of trees for fuel and the Korean war, the reforestation program was little successful.

In the first half of the 60s, the government finally made a strict regulation concerning

the cutting of trees. The media also joined in the crusade. Every Arbor Day, the papers ran an editorial about planting trees. Thanks to the efforts on all fronts, the mountains began to look green in the first half of the 1970s. In addition, the papers began to run editorials about trees in September and October from the latter half of the 70s. These editorials emphasized the importance of after-care of the trees as well as the planting of the trees.

Slowly the viewpoint changed. There were less and less editorials about trees from the 1980s, when only 4 articles appeared. It is thought that this is due to the success of the reforestation program.

### **7. Environmental Movement**

Due to man's dependence on and involvement with his natural habitat, concern for the environment is fundamental. Even before people were conscious of the great pollution which is prevalent today, public attention was already focussed on the need for awareness of environmental preservation.

It was this consciousness which helped people to live in the world long before industrialization. And this consciousness, often referred to as the Oriental way of thinking, includes the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism. The first Buddhist precept is not to take the life of any living being. This alone influenced oriental spiritual life greatly.

Also Chinese Confucianism, which was introduced to Korea, emphasized not killing living things and not cutting trees; for example, establishing tree preservation between February and October, the main time of the year when trees grow. Even though we now call this style of thinking "nature conservation," its main aim was to protect the livelihood of the people.

Many of these traditional ideas have been taught in modern society as well. Even in the 1960s, the period before the advent of industrialization in Korea, the newspaper editorials reminded the people that environmentalism was a traditional dimension of the life-style of the Korean people.

In our traditional culture, the view taken of the environment was completely different from that of the people of today. In those days, people feared nature considering it the main source of their misery against which there was no possible remedy. This viewpoint prevented any means of nature conservation from being developed. This was very evident in the editorials. One article stated, "As there is a lot of humidity and it often rains torrentially in Korea, garbage and toxic wastes naturally rot or are washed away. There-



fore they are not likely to be harmful to the environment.” Due to this kind of view point, Korean people were not open to new ideas about the environment.

The idea of nature conservation, which began in Korea in the early 1960s, was greatly influenced by the theories held in other countries. In 1972, concern for the environment spread widely with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. At that conference, great interest in the world tendency towards environmental conservation was shown to be strong. About the same time there were 2 articles about environment problems and later 8 more advocating environmental consciousness on Environment Day, June 5, a day designated at the conference in Stockholm. This made 10 editorials all together. When Environment Day was designated, the government-controlled Korean Red Cross Society actively participated in the prevention-oriented environmental movement in 1973. The editorials did not fail to notice that.

However, Korea's development-oriented dictatorship—which continued until early 1988—held an environmental policy which was characteristically government-centered. This meant that, as a general rule, no preventative measures were taken and anyone drawing public attention to environmental pollution was almost always stigmatized as “an anti-social man.”

In spite of the lack of support, environmental movements persisted among those people who were directly involved in environmental pollution: professors and intellectuals journalists. The editorials assumed an air of indifference towards these movements led by non-government people.

### **8. Environmental Policy**

Environmental policy can be effectively divided into three parts: environmental assessment, environmental law, and environmental administration. These three areas are related to one another because assessment should be embodied in law (which includes establishing, interpretation, and applying of law), and law again should be materialized in administration.

A total of 71 articles on environmental policy have appeared over the last three decades. Among these articles, environmental administration (35 editorials) was the subject most frequently written about. There were 19 articles on environmental assessment and 17 articles on environmental law.

To look at environmental policy chronologically, there was almost no interest shown in the 1960s when only 3 articles appeared. Neither the public nor the government were drawn to this aspect of the environmental movement. In 1963, when the pollution preven-

tative law was established, no administrative machinery was set up to enforce it until early 1967.

The first editorial on environmental policy was published on July 21, 1964. It urged the materialization of a pollution preventive law. It also mentioned urban landscape beautification. The attitude shown in this article shows the lack of interest shown by the media and the total indifference of the government.

To enhance the importance of environmental conservation, political decisiveness is necessary. In the Korea of those days, the legitimacy of political power rested on economic growth; the statistical figures measuring economic growth were regarded as an index symbolizing legitimacy. After the 1960s, the development decade, it was common practice to consider political interest toward environmental policy as drag on economic growth, when it was precisely political decisiveness that was needed.

It was not until the latter half of the 1970s that political determination in environmental policy began to appear. In 1977, the importance of this matter was emphasized in the new year press conference of the president. Environmental law was then established in the same year. In 1979, much bigger progress was made and finally the Environmental Protection Agency was founded in January, 1980.

The editorials on environmental policy reminded the authorities concerned of the importance of environmental protection. The fact that the relationship between environmental protection and economic growth was especially in conflict with the world-wide experience, was important in the lack of recognition. Therefore the editorials carefully pointed out the importance of finding a compromise between economic growth and environmental protection in order to lessen the conflict for the Korean government that was in the throes of driving for economic growth at that time.

It seems a little strange that there was no discussion about the mutual relationship between environmental protection and other social values: particularly as the conflict with economic growth was concerned. Whenever environmental protection becomes a public interest and more and more people recognize its importance, the benefit usually goes to the rich, not to the poor. Therefore increasing awareness of the importance of environmental protection harms the social equity. This point never seems to have been considered by the writers of the editorials under consideration: they merely concentrated on the conflict with economic growth. In this respect, we can easily recognize that the environmental consciousness of Koreans remained unsophisticated.

The editorials about environmental protection after the 1970s generally added the initiative of environmental law and environmental administration in order to enhance the importance of the environmental question. As in other countries, Korea's environmental law developed in three phases. First, the sanitation law was established. Second, the pollution law was established. And third, the environmental law was established. In the first phase, when the pollution law was made, the government concentrated upon the elimination and prevention of pollution which was troubling the people. In other words, they solely depended on the method of treating symptoms.

The alternative to treating symptoms is to use a proper managerial approach which takes care of the whole environment generally. In developed countries, the approach towards environmental law and environmental administration has been already changed to the managerial approach. In Korea, with the establishment of the environmental policy, the method was finally shifted to the managerial approach in 1977.

In one of the editorial titles, the change from a microscopic vision focused on pollution to a macroscopic vision focussing on the quality of the environment, was also indicated. If we take a chronological look at the frequency of the use of the words pollution and environment in the editorials, each word appeared four times respectively in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the words pollution and environment appeared 51 and 44 times respectively, and 9 and 17 times respectively in the 1980s. Except for the 1960s, the period when awareness of environmental problems was almost absent, the word environment appeared more frequently than the word pollution in the 1980s, the reverse of the 1970s.

### **III. Conclusion**

In the summer of 1989, there was a tap water crisis. Considerable amounts of heavy metals were detected in the Han River water, the main source of water for the city of Seoul. For the first time, people realized they were paying dearly with pollution for the economic miracle of the country.

Comparing the new realization of the dangers of economic success to the total lack of consciousness of the 1960s, this new realization was a great development. The government found itself in a difficult situation: having to choose between survival of the environment and economic growth at the cost of pollution. Most people gave priority to economic growth for they believed that if economic growth were well accomplished, it would be

possible to improve the environment.

In retrospect, over the last three decades, modern Korea overcame the entrepreneur's way of thinking: to slow economic growth was the most dangerous thing they could do. Basically, the environmental problem is nothing but the conflict between economic growth and environmental welfare. Editorials influence that social consciousness constantly assert the need to find a compromise between the two.

In Korea, the government which is ultimately responsible for sustaining the compromise between economic growth and environment is not sufficiently firm. As only 50 percent of Koreans have their own houses and 60 percent of Korean city dwellers live in rented houses, the government thinks that it must overcome these conflicts in economic growth and invest as quickly as possible in public welfare. The result is that environmental conservation sinks to second position. In addition, the government thinks that the environment is only the concern of the wealthy and not that of the ordinary people.

Fortunately, the situation is saved by the people, for they recognize that the difference in the quality of life is made by a healthy environment and not by the government. People have begun to organize groups and to have meetings. These actions have formed the basis of a newly organized social movement.

In my opinion, environmental conservation is spread in the two different directions. In the former, the role of the citizen is recognized to be important and in the latter, overcoming the concept of "world" which originated from the exclusive, segregative concept of nationalism, they recognize the earth is the only community in which all mankind lives. Therefore the environment is the most important thing in our lives.

At first glance, these seem to be opposed points of view. One concentrates on the individual, the other on the global. However, it is not inconceivable to harmonize the two. The ultimate standpoint is after all that mankind is responsible for the world, and this is the view point of awakened people.