

# Darrell G. Moen, Ph.D.

Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

---

## **The Monks, the Trees, and the Concrete Jungle**

(1994:26 min., close-captioned, edited version 12 min.)

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

**Narrator:** On the slopes of Mt. Fuji, generations of Japanese continue to show their reverence for nature. Two-thirds of this beautiful country is still covered with pristine, protected forest. Yet, here in Chiba Harbor in Tokyo, reverence gives way to rape - once mighty forests reduced to wallowing hulks. Not so long ago, much of the tropical timber imported into Japan came from the forests of Thailand. Most of what was left by the loggers has been cleared for agriculture. But here in Thailand, and in Japan itself, champions of the forest have emerged. Reverence may yet prove mightier than the chainsaw.

**Narrator:** Of all the environments on earth, the tropical forests are by far the richest and by far the most important. For they are home to between 70% and 90% of all the millions of species with which we share this planet. Lose them, and we lose the biological foundations of life on earth. And yet losing them is exactly what we are doing. Already, in just a few decades, over half of the world's tropical forests have been destroyed.

If nothing is done, most of the rest will vanish within our lifetimes. And by the year 2020, a third of all species on the planet may be lost. Millions of years of evolution wiped out in the time it takes to set a fire or fell a tree. Tribal people displaced and their cultures destroyed. The land impoverished, incapable of sustaining agriculture. The climate changed and made drier, locally at first, then regionally. Potential benefits to we humans like new drugs, new crops, new products, lost before we can even give them a name.

The destruction of the tropical forests and the extinction of species are different from most other environmental problems for they cannot be reversed. Extinction is, indeed, forever.

**Narrator:** As far as Japan is concerned, the tropical timber trade is still booming. Southeast Asia is being skinned alive [by Japan] to keep those logs flowing in.

Unfortunately, the environmental movement in Japan is still very weak, and big business is frighteningly powerful. It's that imbalance which defines the challenge for Yoichi Kuroda, a dogged, courageous campaigner deeply ashamed of his country's environmental reputation and international record.

**Yoichi Kuroda (Japan Tropical Forest Action Network, JATAN):** [speaking in Japanese] Seven years ago, I visited the island of Mindanao in the Philippines and I saw a completely barren mountain stripped of its trees and vegetation. Seeing that affected me deeply and I felt that I had to do something to help prevent this type of deforestation. JATAN aims to stop the wasteful consumption of tropical timber in Japan. This, I believe, is our first and most important task.

**Narrator:** Over the last 30 years, Japan's economy has grown faster than any other country's in the world. For many Japanese, these "hanging gardens of neon" are about as near to nature as they're likely to get. But not many countries can match Japan's impressive record on pollution control, energy efficiency, or recycling.

It's what happens overseas that causes such concern. In more and more countries, it is Japanese capital that fuels the juggernaut of industrial progress - whole cultures can get crushed beneath its wheels. Logging in Sarawak for export to Japan has brought its tribal people to the verge of extinction. JATAN has taken up their cause.

**Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN):** We invited the indigenous peoples' representatives from Sarawak in Malaysia to speak in Japan because the rainforest of Sarawak will be destroyed in four or five years. So the situation is at its most critical stage now. The culture, lives, and existence of the indigenous peoples are being destroyed due to logging practices. We have conveyed the urgency of the situation to the ITTO (International Tropical Timber Organization), to the Japanese government, and to the logging companies to stop the deforestation.

**Narrator:** Tokyo is the headquarters the ITTO, would-be guardians of the forest but essentially a glorified commodity agreement with a few, pale-green trimmings.

**Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN):** The ITTO basically makes decisions on a consensual basis. However, Japan and the other big timber importers in Europe have much of the voting power along with the major exporting nations such as Malaysia, Brazil, [the United States,] and Indonesia. So, fundamentally, there is a built-in bias in the voting system. The basic policy of all these producer and consumer nations is to destroy and exploit the forests.

**Narrator:** Direct action on the model of Greenpeace is an important part of JATAN's campaigning. [Unidentified woman at JATAN demonstration before ITTO conference

delegates: "ITTO sent their research team to Sarawak, but they are not considering at all the plight of the indigenous peoples and their rights to the land!"

**Narrator:** Japan imports 45% of all the world's tropical timber. Almost all of it is used in just one business - the construction industry. In a process that literally defies belief, these precious tropical hardwoods are turned into plywood moulds into which the concrete for the foundations is poured. Once the concrete has set, the plywood moulds are removed and then burnt. It's cheaper to cut down another tropical forest than it is to reuse the timber, let alone to find a different construction method.

**Narrator:** One of the newest and biggest buildings in Japan is the Tokyo Metropolitan Office Building located in Shinjuku. Power, money, and prestige - its architecture speaks a simple language.

**Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN):** This building was built around a pre-cast steel frame so tropical timber was not used in the entire structure. However, a lot of timber was used to build the underground area including a parking lot. The problem is that on this site, just 440,000 square meters, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 tropical trees have been used, and the previous Metropolitan Offices Building was used for only 30 years.

I don't know how long this monstrous building will be used, but the lifespan of such ferro-concrete buildings in Japan is very short so more tropical timber is being used at an ever-faster rate.

**Narrator:** 5,000 trees to build an underground car park! For JATAN, that's an unacceptable price for progress. But after several years of banging their heads against the brick wall of national government and big business, JATAN is now targeting local government and the general public - with considerable success. More and more Japanese people are awakening to their environmental responsibilities.

**Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN):** If Japanese people become truly aware and understand what is happening, they will be able to take action. It is very important for us to appeal to the consciousness of the Japanese people so that values are changed. By taking responsible and informed action, we Japanese can truly be of benefit to people throughout the world, and become happier and feel more enriched ourselves.