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Research Paper

### Japan's Park System: History and Present Day Characteristics

Parks are an integral part of a well-functioning, environmentally conscious society. Not only do they provide environmental education for the surrounding community, but they also create opportunities for community members to develop connections with one another, as well as cultivating a profound appreciation of nature and strengthening the communities resolve to protect it. The Japanese Ministry of Environment (MOE) defines the purpose of parks as “[preserving] beautiful scenic areas and their ecosystems and [contributing] to the health, recreation and culture of citizens by promoting their utilization.”<sup>1</sup> As the broadness of this statement indicates, parks fulfill a multiplicity of roles in their local communities. In this paper, I will first provide a brief history of the Japanese Park system, and then explain its modern characteristics.

The conversation about Japanese national parks began when a citizen submitted a petition, “Application to Recognize Nikko as an Imperial Park”, to the Diet in 1911<sup>2</sup>. In 1927, the government then established the National Parks Association in response to increased demand. Then, in 1931, the government enacted first piece of park legislation, the Law of National Parks, outlining the function, selection process, and management policy of Japanese national parks. Finally, in March 1934, the first National Parks opened (Setonaikai, Unzen, and Kirishima), followed by five more in December of that year (Aso, Nikko, Chubusangaku, Akan, and Daisetsuzan), and four more in 1936 (Towada, Fuji-Hakone, Yoshino-Kumano, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/doc/files/parksystem.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/about/history.html>

Daisen)<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, the selection criteria for these parks was not simply ecological or aesthetic, but deeply political. The book “The theory of Japanese Landscape” (1894), written by renowned Japanese geographer Shigetaka Shiga, claimed that above all else, mountains embodied the Japanese spirit. Given how widely his books circulated, this idea influenced the decision-making of government officials in charge of designating which locations were to become national parks<sup>4</sup>. In essence, Imperial Japan had politicized the national parks and morphed them into a vehicle for nationalism at home, and a means to project a consolidated Japanese aesthetic in their colonial outposts. For example, when Taiwan was beginning its process of constructing its first parks in the mid-1930s, Japanese colonial officials dominated the decision-making, and ensured a strict adherence to the aesthetic ideals mentioned above. Even today, the Ministry of the Environment’s rhetoric carries nationalistic undertones. On its website, it decrees that national parks should be selected by virtue of their “[being] representative of Japan” and a “landscape that can be introduced to the world with pride.”<sup>5</sup>

Soon thereafter, Japan became embroiled in international conflict first with China, and then with the Allied powers. Understandably, its park initiatives were put on hold. After the war, however, the MOE designated eight more locations, and in 1957, a new Natural Parks Legislation was passed, delineating three different park classifications: national parks, quasi-national parks, and local nature preserves called prefectural natural parks<sup>6</sup>. While the Director General of the Environment Agency designates national and quasi-national parks, prefectural governments designate the prefectural natural parks of their jurisdiction<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, national

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/doc/files/parksystem.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.lit.osaka-cu.ac.jp/geo/pdf/frombelow/0308\\_frombelow\\_kanda.pdf](http://www.lit.osaka-cu.ac.jp/geo/pdf/frombelow/0308_frombelow_kanda.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/about/history.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/doc/files/parksystem.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/npr/ncj/section5.html>

parks are administered by the Ministry of the Environment, whereas quasi-national parks and prefectural natural parks are administered by their prefectural governments. The actual selection process relies both on subjective judgements of the perceived beauty of an area, as well as specifically defined requirements of scale. National Parks, for example, need to be “[larger] than 30,000 hectares, ... [include] at least two landscape elements to provide varied scenic beauty, ... [and have] a landscape nucleus encompassing more than 2,000 hectares ... hardly affected by detrimental development action.”<sup>8</sup> Quasi-national parks, on the other hand, only have to encompass 10,000 hectares and have less stringent requirements about how well maintained the land has to be.

In the 60s and 70s Japan’s economic boom increased awareness of the dangers of pollution, the need for environmentally conscious decision-making, and created a more economically secure middle-class whose increased leisure time boosted demand for scenic parks. Much of Japan’s growth of the era can be pinned to its transitioning from an economy reliant on light industry, to one that was a global leader in steel production and other heavy industry. Consequently, the number of factories increased and large numbers of people moved to the city. On the one hand, this complicated Japan’s waste management strategy since the amount of industrial waste had increased, but it also imbued parks with a certain nostalgic charm, in which new urbanites could escape the drudgery of factory life and return to a more natural setting. To address the growing concern over environmental issues, the Japanese government established the Environment Agency in 1971, whose name changed into the Ministry of the Environment in 2001.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/doc/files/parksystem.pdf>

Aside from the administrative history of Japanese national parks, the geographic characteristics of Japan also make Japanese parks unique, especially compared to famous American parks. Since America has lots of relatively scarcely populated territory, Yellowstone, Yosemite, etc. are all large, protected areas of relatively untouched and remote nature. Given Japan's high population density and history of privately owned farmland, however, this same strategy was, and is still impossible. Instead, Japan had to carefully select comparatively small segments of nature, and co-own them with various private landowners, often cooperating with them in the conservation and park maintenance efforts.

To this end, the Ministry of the Environment has progressively expanded on the foundation of the 1957 Natural Parks Act. Most of these regulatory procedures and guidelines aim to ensure the security of the park's ecosystem and the efficient management of park resources; however, there are also regulations which mediate the relationship between the government and private owners of parkland. More specifically, in case private owners fail to conserve the natural resources adequately enough, the Scenic Landscape Protection Agreement acts allowing the government to legally absorb those responsibilities, even if they infringe on personal rights of the owner. Additionally, since some of the private owners of designated land sometimes fail to acquire the permissions or licenses necessary for conservation, the Special Private Land Purchase System allows the government to buy this land from them at a fair price<sup>9</sup>. This last law also gives the MOE the right to buy land which has been recognized as national park quality from private owners, even if these have no intention of selling.

On top of that, the Ministry of Education also drafts a regulatory plan and a facility plan for each national and quasi-national park and revises it every five years. The most important

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/npr/ncj/section5.html>

regulation delineated in this plan is the division of the park into different zones. The Special Zone is further divided into Class I, II, and III, depending on how important the Ministry of Education judges the land to be. Class I Zones have the highest priority and prohibit the construction of buildings, or any infringement upon the area's natural scenic beauty. Class III Zones, on the other hand, have less aesthetic value, and permit agriculture, forestry and fishery. Aside from the Special Zones, there are also the Marine Park Zone and the Ordinary Zone. Marine Park Zones are notable due to their "abundant marine animals and plants" and the Ordinary Zone acts as a protective buffer zone around certain Special zones, and permits construction as long as it does not obstruct the scenic beauty of the park<sup>10</sup>. The facility plan is merely a guideline on how to construct buildings and facilities so as not to disturb the eco-system or jeopardize the beauty of the park.

In 2004, 351,350,000 people visited national parks, 290,650,000 visited quasi-national parks and 266,120,000 visited prefectural natural parks in 2004. However, ever since the economic downturn in 08, these numbers have been steadily decreasing<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, many national parks have been running into complications due to overutilization of certain park areas, invasive species, and harm by wildlife. According to a report by the Japan Forestry Agency, "8,000 hectares of the country's forest were harmed in 2015 by wildlife – 77 percent of it due to deer."<sup>12</sup>To counteract this, the government is actively trying to reduce the deer population to half of its current size by 2025<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/npr/ncj/section5.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/park/about/protect/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://psmag.com/environment/can-wolves-save-japanese-forests>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5320425/>

In the future, parks will continue to play a significant role in Japanese society. While difficulties will certainly arise due to domestic ecological reasons, it is perhaps more likely that the lethargy of global politics will impede the progress of anti-global warming efforts, and harm the Japanese environment. That being said, this research has illustrated that much park related legislation and policy already exists, indicating that the MOE, or any future equivalent, will continue to advance the best interest of parks, nature, and the environment.