

The Japan Times

Changing self and systems for a leaner and greener Japan

By [STEPHEN HESSE](#), Sunday, Jan. 22, 2012

Year in, year out, it never ceases to amaze me what a difference a day makes.

In an instant, December ends, January begins, and a miraculous transformation takes place. For the reverent and the riotous equally, midnight wipes the cosmic slate clean.

Through some curious combination of tradition, superstition and mass suspension of disbelief, we embrace the conviction that bygones truly are bygones and we have been granted one more chance to start anew — and to do it right this time.

I love this boundless optimism of the human spirit, because it proves that human society *can* open a window of opportunity, however briefly, to consider change and believe that change is possible.

This faith in human potential is one of the fundamental reasons environmentalists stay on message year after year, even as human population multiplies and our activities steadily degrade the planet.

The Worldwatch Institute in Washington, for example, recently published "12 Simple Steps to Go Green," so that "each of us can make a commitment to reducing our environmental impacts," as they put it.

Therefore, in the spirit of new year resolutions and individual change, those 12 steps are listed below, with some brief notes particularly for Japanese readers.

Individual action alone, however, is not nearly enough to effect the substantial changes that are needed, so this column also includes my own wish list for Japan of systemic changes essential to ensure the health and welfare of its residents.

But first, the Worldwatch 12. **1.** Recycle ... and reduce, repair, reuse and refrain from unnecessary consumption. **2.** Turn off the lights ... and all other electrical appliances you're not using. **3.** Switch ... from incandescent bulbs to compact fluorescent lamps and LEDs. **4.** Turn on the tap ... and give up bottled water. "While public tap water is subject to strict safety regulations, the [U.S.] bottled-water industry is not required to report testing results for its products. According to a study, 10 of the most popular brands of bottled water contain a wide range of pollutants, including pharmaceuticals,

fertilizer residue and arsenic," reports Worldwatch. **5.** Turn down the heat ... and insulate houses to save energy and money, and to cut CO₂ (carbon dioxide) emissions. **6.** Support food-recovery programs.

"Each year, roughly a third of all food produced for human consumption — approximately 1.3 billion tons — gets lost or wasted, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)," notes the institute. Need more be said? **7.** Buy local.

"Instead of relying exclusively on large supermarkets, consider farmers markets and local farms for your produce, eggs, dairy and meat. Food from these sources is usually fresher and more flavorful, and your money will be going directly to these food producers," suggests Worldwatch.

That has to be good advice anywhere, but especially for those in Japan concerned about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) hollowing out the nation's agricultural sector. **8.** Get out and ride.

In the aftermath of last year's Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, which stopped trains and subways and stranded millions of Tokyo residents, bikes have become increasingly popular.

Unfortunately, Tokyo still has shockingly few designated bike lanes, and motor vehicle drivers have yet to acknowledge that bicycle riders are legally entitled to share the road with them. **9.** Share a car.

With fewer young Japanese eager to take on the costs, inconveniences and maintenance of cars, Japan may be ripe for the introduction of car-sharing programs, such as Zipcar in the United States. **10.** Plant a garden.

While this is often not an option for city-dwellers in Japan, there are community gardens and small plots to rented in the suburbs within an easy traveling distance. **11.** Compost.

This, too, can be difficult for city-dwellers, but it's worth cooperating with landlords, neighbors and city officials to collect kitchen waste for composting locally or by nearby farmers. **12.** Reduce your meat consumption.

"Livestock production accounts for about 18 percent of all human-caused greenhouse-gas emissions and accounts for about 23 percent of all global water used in agriculture. Yet global meat production has experienced a 20 percent growth rate since 2000 to meet the per capita increase of meat consumption of about 42 kg," according to Worldwatch.

For more detailed information on the Worldwatch Institute's "12 Simple Steps to Go Green," and useful tips, visit www.worldwatch.org.

And now my short list of three systemic changes I believe are essential for Japan's future.

In recent weeks, several others writing in The Japan Times have taken up some of the same concerns as I refer to here, and have given them the detailed discussion they deserve. In those cases, I have suggested readers seek out my colleagues' greater wisdom. **1.** A more responsive and independent Japanese media.

Several recent events have reminded us how sloppy and unresponsive Japan's major newspapers can be: failing to investigate the Olympus scandal until it broke overseas; failing to expose a nuclear power industry that has long suffered numerous accidents and oversight failures; and ignoring for decades the incestuous relationship among national government bureaucrats, politicians and Japan's all-powerful utilities, including Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco), operator of the three reactors that melted down at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in spring 2011.

For excellent coverage of these issues, see the Timeout section of The Japan Times on Jan. 8, in which Tokyo-based reporter David McNeill exposes the media's easy willingness to turn a blind eye to corporate malfeasance and their collusion with the nuclear power industry.

As McNeill points out, investigative journalism in Japan is generally limited to magazines and journals that have few readers, little advertising and less clout than major printed or other media. As a result, until Japan's big media break free of their cozy relationship with business and government, Japanese residents will never enjoy the transparency and accountability needed for a vibrant democracy. **2.** Restructured power generation and distribution in Japan.

Nuclear power may have a long-term role to play elsewhere, but not on the Pacific Rim where reactors are high-stakes roulette. Eventually someone loses.

For a safe and sustainable energy future, and one that can yield lucrative technology exports, Japan needs to phase out nuclear energy while introducing safe alternatives.

The problem is simple: Japanese power utilities, such as Tepco, which are wedded to nuclear power, control both the generation and the transmission of electricity throughout the nation. This means that entrepreneurs and startups eager to generate and sell electricity from alternative sources can only do so if the major utilities agree to transmit and distribute it — which they won't, of course, to any substantial degree unless they are legally obliged to do so.

However, the solution is equally simple: For alternative-energy entrepreneurs to promote and sell safe and renewable energy that will eventually replace nuclear power, those entrepreneurs need equal access to the national electric grids.

Unless Japanese citizens demand that electricity generation and distribution are managed separately, the nation's energy future will be held hostage by Tepco and other utilities. Here, too, transparency and accountability are essential for the safe energy future Japan's residents are demanding. **3.** Revitalize Japan's forests and forestry industry.

Every spring, when the vast swirling yellow clouds of cedar pollen come blowing across Tokyo from the monoculture forests of the western hills, I swear to myself that I will move to Okinawa or Hokkaido. Instead, I just complain loudly each year.

So, with a deep bow to a man who cares more about the future of this country than most Japanese politicians or bureaucrats, I suggest that the government embrace the wisdom of my JT colleague, C.W. Nicol.

"With such a wonderful natural and employment resource, we must obviously revive the forestry industry here in Japan — but in a way that is sustainable and respectful to wildlife, biodiversity and local culture," Nicol wrote in his Jan. 1 "Old Nic's Notebook" column on this page. Amen.

Nic is a respected forestry consultant in Japan, but on my wish list he should have carte blanche to set the forestry industry on its feet and on the right track. Japan's forests have boundless potential — but that potential is now languishing undeveloped.

The year 2012 has just begun, and Japan's new-year window of opportunity is open, however briefly, to embrace change. But the belief that change is possible can quickly wilt into defeatism, and a perfect opportunity can easily be lost — again.

"The only time you can get things done is in moments of genuine crisis and catastrophes — (then) there's a small opportunity to do an extraordinary amount," Bloomberg View columnist William Pesek wrote in his JT piece on Jan. 9, quoting Malcolm Gladwell, author of the acclaimed bestseller, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference," published in 2000.

Since World War II, there has never been a more profound state of crisis in this nation. That said, there has also never been a better chance for an extraordinary amount of positive change to be brought about . . .

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