

Preface

Special Issue : Progress in Human Dimension Research of Global Change in Asia and the Pacific

“Environmental issues” can be defined as conflicts arising from the interaction between human beings and nature. For the past several decades natural scientists have been anticipating and revealing enormous, rapid environmental changes on a global scale. In order to support expanding population and economic activities, human beings have had an increasing tendency over the past two centuries to depend on marginal and scarce natural environments, including terrestrial and aqueous ecosystems. This, in turn, made human society itself more vulnerable. At the same time, too, through mass consumption and mass dumping of waste, humans have over this short period depleted natural resources such as minerals and fossil energy which accumulated within the earth over the eons and have disrupted their own base for survival in the natural environment.

Our recent knowledge on how human pressures are influencing the natural environment, though still imperfect, is now motivating human beings to take control of the magnitude of their own activities in order to secure their own base for survival and find a path to sustainable development. After the “early warning period” of the 1980s, natural scientists have worked hard in the field of global change through a number of international cooperative scientific programmes such as SCOPE, IGBP and WCRP. In parallel with these, the human dimensions research on global change was initiated in the late 1980s by the scientific community which deals with human dimensions, represented by social and cultural science and the humanities. It is human society that must change its lifestyle, the behavior of individuals, the socio-economic and institutional framework and civilization mechanism in order to adapt to the rapid changes it itself has caused. There is, therefore, a huge expectation on this society and its responsibilities.

In 1995, the human dimensions of global change research community created an assembly for exchanging research ideas and results on an individual basis as its worldwide “Open” Meetings. The first of this series of Open Meetings was held at Duke University in 1995 ; the second, at IIASA in Luxembourg in 1997 ; and the most recent, at Shonan Village in Japan in 1999. These provided researchers of a community highly diversified among regions in terms of both geography and disciplines great opportunities to get to know each other, develop common views on future research trends and enhance collaborative research. For young researchers and researchers from developing countries in particular, these meetings served as good opportunities to enhance their own research capacity. The Fourth Open Meeting is to be held in 2001 in Brazil to strengthen this momentum.

This special issue of Global Environment consists mainly of articles submitted and presented at the 1999 Open Meeting of the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change Research Community held on 24–26 June 1999, focusing on Japan and the Asia–Pacific Region, which is the major coverage and target of this journal. In addition to these research articles, it includes a report on the state-of-the-art of research trends and the progress of human dimension research activities in Japan and the region and provides a historical background of environmental issues in Japan as well.

Reflecting the pre-maturity of this research field in this region, the editor encountered some difficulties in arranging articles for this issue so as to have a well consolidated structure. Still, the editor hopes this issue will contribute scientifically to the society which is aiming at a sustainable future, as a message from Japan and the Asia–Pacific Region.

Shuzo Nishioka

National Institute for Environmental Studies
Institute for Global Environmental Strategies