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Japanese Environmentalism Reflected through *Princess Mononoke*

Recently, Japan has led political negotiations toward creating stronger and more impactful environmental policies. Nevertheless, it still faces many environmental issues. Hayao Miyazaki's 1997 animated film *Princess Mononoke* (もののけ姫 Mononoke-hime) encapsulates the negative implications of destroying nature for the sake of economic gain. Here, the audience can derive many environmental issues. For example, acts such as deforestation can lead to an excessive demand for trade of timber, resulting in endangered species and demonstrating the negative consequences of losing access to nature. This paper will explore the impact of environmentalism in *Princess Mononoke* with greater detail, while exploring the adverse effects people encounter as a result of the devastation of nature.

The film follows the story of Ashitaka, a prince who left his homeland after being attacked by a dying and rampaging boar god, Nago, and is cursed by the attack. Ashitaka goes west with an open mind to seek the cause of Nago's demise and discovers Irontown, a community led by Eboshi responsible for crafting the iron ball that killed Nago. Ashitaka learns that Eboshi is cutting down the forest to harvest materials for crafting weapons, all the while enraging the animals of the forest, creating a relationship of hate and violence. After his meeting with Eboshi, Ashitaka seeks the forest spirit, the god of the forest which governs life and death to seek aid for his curse. He then meets San, a human raised by the wolf tribe who seeks revenge

against the humans devastating their forest. Ashitaka must learn how to stop the violence of war and bring about a peaceful balance between humans and nature.

In the case of *Princess Mononoke*, for the sake of building a community and establishing it in a location that is rich with the materials they need to make their iron, the people of Irontown built their settlement in the mountains within a forest. In order to accomplish this feat, they had to clear the forest. Deforestation can be classified as the clearing of trees in forests, usually in large numbers, and turning it into clear land. There is no real natural cause for this circumstance to occur. Instead, the clearing of these forests is caused by people. The reasons for deforestation vary, but it is generally tied to factors that are either political or economic. Every country has their own stance when it comes to the topic of deforestation, even Japan.

Deforestation is a major environmental concern in Japanese society. This is mostly due to Japan's access to wood, or rather timber, being dependent on imports from the forests of other countries. According to Mari Yoshimura's Article, "Deforestation and Japan's Timber Trade":

Eighty percent of Japan's timber demand is met by imported products, which makes it one of the largest importers in the world. For example, Japan imports thirty-two percent of timber produced in Malaysia, followed by China which imports thirteen percent of timber from Malaysia. Japan imports more than eighty percent of lumber produced in Siberia, which makes it the dominant importer of Siberian lumber (Yoshimura, 2-3).

This much demand for timber is excessive and could lead to permanent damage on the forests' soil and their ability to one day regrow the forests. While this commercial importing of timber greatly reduces the amount of deforestation within Japan itself, it is still a major environmental

concern in modern Japan. I feel that a great representation of Japan and its policies for deforestation is found with the community of Irontown in *Princess Mononoke*.

Miyazaki depicts Irontown to be a large, heavily fortified fortress with walls of large lumber. The trees in the surrounding area of Irontown is shown to either have been cut down or burned, leaving behind a scorched and ashen landscape. Smoke is also seen coming from the forge in the fortress. The mise-en-scène of this setting generates a feeling of unease because it is purposefully made to seem sinister at first. This image of Irontown is similar to how an industry might be seen.

If we liken the community of Irontown to an industry, then how does it operate as a system? In this circumstance, the one who runs this industry could also be compared to a governmental authoritative figure. This would be the leader of the community of Irontown, Eboshi, and she would be comparative to both the head of this industry and a government figure. Eboshi has the authority to issue where the materials should come from, as well as how much is needed, or how much should be acquired regardless of need or demand. An example of this would be how the humans of Irontown purposefully cut down trees in the forest, on Eboshi's command, to make the boars angry and provoke them into charging at the humans and falling into life threatening danger. Miyazaki really illustrates how the devastation of nature really changes the landscape and how it effects the wild life.

Miyazaki gives the audience an overhead shot of what the people of Irontown and the hunters are doing during this time. In this particular shot, the audience can see stumps where trees once stood, trees in piles with no real use, and the burning of a foul incense to tamper with the animals' senses. The mise-en-scène in this shot depicts an image that can be the equivalent to large companies of the present-day tearing down the environment for materials to be bought and

used by manufacturers. The excessive cutting down of the trees in the forest was wasteful in that it was not for the purpose of gathering materials and it was potentially damaging to the environment overall. While timber has a plethora of uses, the cutting down of trees during this part of the film can mostly be likened to a political reasoning rather than an economic one. All the while, the people of Irontown do not seem to mind the clearing of the forest for purposes beyond material harvesting. This is a circumstance where deforestation is specifically meant to affect the animals of the forest, mainly by agitating them. This represents the Japanese government's excessive demand for timber.

Cutting down trees is widely considered as an act against environmentalism, but it can ironically help the forest in some cases. Yoshimura states that "cutting a certain amount of trees may be necessary to save the forests from currently excessive harvestable trees. However, cutting them is by no means the solution for restoring the health of Japan's forest because commercial logging causes more or less adverse effects on the balance of ecosystems" (Yoshimura, 55). Whereas most timber is commercial and imported, there are still forests in Japan that face possible deforestation, although "if Japan consumes domestic lumber excessively without careful consideration about fragile balance of the ecosystems, deterioration in Japan's forests could occur" (Yoshimura 55). With deforestation being an environmental threat and concern to the people of Japan, a solution is required to greatly reduce the demand for timber and thus reduce Japan's and other countries' deforestation.

Yoshimura talks about three possible solutions into protecting the forests and reducing deforestation. The first being the "protection of public interest" (Yoshimura 47). By stating the functions of the forest and how they benefit the public, audiences will be drawn to them. This will also instill the belief that the loss of these forests also means the natural loss of said benefits.

The next is “protecting Japan’s forest based on common values and needs” (Yoshimura 47). This involves the increase use of domestic timber. Doing this also creates more potential jobs. While not many audiences would agree that this effects their lives, it promotes the forest industry and provides a sense of mutual support. And lastly is to “discourage the audiences’ use of imported lumber by discussing the negative aspects of the use such as waste of money, health risk, and destruction of Japan’s forests and forest industry” (Yoshimura 49). By doing this, the Japanese government can internalize the issue and Japanese citizens can come together more under a shared value. The coming together as a community and realizing an issue is a large step in making a difference, which is a lesson learned by the people of Irontown at the end of the film.

The scene where the forest spirit collapses and revitalizes the land is also a moment of clarity for the people of Irontown. Within the the *mise-en-scène* of this scene, the audience can see lush green grass everywhere that is shown to have trees that have been previously cleared or destroyed. This begins when the land was being restored at sunrise of a new day. The entirety of Irontown has also been covered with grass, moss, leaves, and flowers. This generates a feeling that the path that Eboshi and the people took were wrong in the past ambitions and is being covered up. This scene also features a panning shot of the revitalized land to give the audience a better look at this newly rejuvenated land. This was most likely to help develop a newfound appreciation of the landscape for the audience and view what the people are seeing as well. The theme of this scene is rebirth and is likely to be interpreted as a new beginning for Eboshi and the people of Irontown. These acts of deforestation, while intended mainly for material harvesting for needs of either commerce or material for the community, are not without victims. They, in fact, are very damaging and harmful to the wild life and ecosystems that had been long

since established. This is true to any act of deforestation, and in *Princess Mononoke* it is brought to the extreme.

Miyazaki gives the audience a good representation of the effects of the destruction of nature in *Princess Mononoke*; specifically, how it effects the humans and wild life. While this destruction of nature does not really affect or stir an emotion in the people of Irontown, it does upset the natural balance of the environment and the ecosystem established within. A prime example of change in the ecosystem in the film is Nago, the boar god, and his boar tribe. It is not shown in the film, but to establish Irontown, Eboshi and the people needed to clear a section of the forest in an ideal location. When they began clearing the forest, they encountered the boar tribe for the first time.

Eboshi's need to clear the forest ultimately resulted in the deaths of this boar tribe. The only exception was Nago, who fled to the Emishi clan's land. The audience sees later, in the film, another boar tribe led by Okkoto, another boar god. This second tribe consisted well over a hundred boars. Assuming each tribe had similar numbers, Eboshi and the people of Irontown would have to have been causing the deaths of around an equal number of boars in the wild or chasing them away as a result of their deforestation tactics. The destruction of this ecosystem can be likened to the Ryukyu long-furred rat of Japan.

The Ryukyu long-furred rat is considered a rare species of wild life found in Japan. This species of rodent is primarily located on the islands of Amami-oshima, Tokuno-shima and Okinawa-jima in Japan. According to Okano et al., in the article "Reproductive traits of the Ryukyu long-furred rat (*Diplothrix legata*) on Okinawa-jima Island":

This rare species is listed as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List and the Japanese Red List. The major threats to the Ryukyu long-furred rat are deforestation and predation by feral dogs, cats and introduced mongooses (*Herpestes auropunctatus*). Vehicle-caused mortality of a number of Ryukyu long-furred rats has recently been reported by the Ministry of the Environment, Japan. (Okano et al. 1)

This information provides real testimony that acts that destroy nature, such as deforestation, cause harm to an environment's ecosystem and harm the wild life. Even if those clearing the forests don't directly harm them, they still drive them away to new environments where they could potentially be killed by another animal that would see them as prey or drive them into human territory where a number of incidents could occur that would cost them their lives. If the Ryukyu long-furred rat were large creatures like the apes or the boars in *Princess Mononoke*, then perhaps the circumstances would be given. Internationally, there are laws set in place that protect and preserve species, especially the larger ones. In the case of the film, however, no such laws exist, especially when it came to the ape tribe or Okkoto and his tribe of boars.

The ape tribe is an example of animal species being victims of Irontown's clearing of the forest. They are the only species shown in the film that also take up a role to try and replant trees for a new forest to grow. However, Eboshi and those under her employment shoot at the ape tribe when they attempt to replant trees for the forest. This would be an example of organisms in an ecosystem that have lost their natural habitat and are driven into human territory.

One of the most crucial points in the film is the battle between the boar tribe and the people of Irontown and the hired hunters. There are small frames where the audience is shown the boars being completely overtaken and facing decimation. It generates a feeling of sadness,

especially from the audience due to how senseless this massacre was. The audience can also experience these feelings through some of the characters. The only characters who can speak that fought for the forest are San, the human wolf princess of the wolf tribe and Okkoto, the boar god. Because of their intellectual ability to speak and comprehend their surroundings and the circumstances they face, Miyazaki uses them to express feelings of anguish, fury, and fear to the audience. Both sides are left with their own consequences to deal with.

By the end of this battle, the humans had suffered dozens of lost lives while the boars were completely wiped out, with the exception of Okkoto fleeing to the forest spirit for aid. The scene where Ashitaka stumbles upon the battle site after the battle had ended shows the consequences of both sides. The *mise-en-scène* of the setting is meant to generate fear and sadness. When the setting is first opened up, the audience almost immediately sees the carcasses of dead boars killed in the battle. As the camera pans to the right, the audience can see how the land is destroyed by the humans' explosives and the smoke is still rising from remaining embers of the battle. The scene then shows a shot of boar carcasses in a pile, as if to show that the humans did not have any respect for the lives of the animals they have killed in the name of their employer. This can be supported with evidence shown in the next scene with Okkoto and the hunters.

As Okkoto is using the last of his strength to search for the forest spirit, the hunters are following him using the skins and blood of his fallen boars to fool him. This could be considered an act of poaching in modern Japan. This leads to the death of Okkoto, Moro the wolf god, and the forest spirit. If the deities were to be considered their own species in the film, then they would be considered extinct as far as the audience knows. All the boars shown in the film have also been shown to either have successfully run away or be killed by the humans. The humans of



Irontown show no remorse in regard to the destruction of nature throughout most of the film. They don't even consider the possible benefits or effects of having nature being a part of their lives.

As stated once before, losing access to the forest could result in a great loss in that the people would lose the benefits provided by nature, but how beneficial is it to have nature be a part of human lives? What becomes of people after losing access to nature? I believe these questions are perfectly answered in the underlying tone shifts during certain points in *Princess Mononoke*.

In the duration of the film, Miyazaki has given several scenes where characters being surrounded in nature has brought upon some form of healing properties. The first example to look at would be Ashitaka's first visit to the forest lake where the forest spirit resides. The mise-en-scène shows large, lush green trees that cover the forest so thickly that the inside of the forest is viewed as a darker environment where there is little sunlight beaming through. The lake is wide and clear, as if to state just how natural and pure it is. In this scene, Ashitaka is in pain due to the curse placed by the dying Nago and places his arm in the lake as he is fetching water for Koroku and the injured man along with them. After tending to both of them, Ashitaka sees the forest spirit for the first time. It is when they leave the forest after spending some time to tend to their wounds that both Ashitaka and Koroku state how refreshed they were. This could represent how the environment effects the body's natural healing ability. This would represent a physiological change due to simply being in a natural environment like the forest. This occurrence does bring up an interesting question: can nature effect a person on a physiological level? To answer this, I will look to research found in an article written by Lee et al.

In the article “Effect of Forest Bathing on Physiological and Psychological Responses in Young Japanese Male Subjects”, an experiment is explained involving twelve male subjects undergoing two separate field studies for three days and two nights in an urban city and a deciduous forest terrain in Hokkaido Prefecture, Japan. They were divided into two groups of six. The first field study was to put each group in a hotel, take biological data before stimulus would be applied, then separate the groups by placing one in the forest and the other in the city. Each group was instructed to rest for fifteen minutes and look out at the views they experienced. After the fifteen minutes they would be returned to the hotel and data would be recorded after stimuli was experienced. This process would repeat until the third day, where the groups would swap venues and then collect the data afterwards. According to the results found in this study:

The data obtained in this study suggest that contact with forests has a positive effect on autonomic nervous system activity and reduces the level of salivary cortisol. The present result on the suppression of the sympathetic nervous system in the forest is partly consistent with a previous study that investigated salivary amylase in normal young adults. Elevated parasympathetic nervous activity due to forest stimuli, which is usually observed under conditions of relaxation caused by soothing music or Zen meditation, indicates that forest bathing may facilitate physiological relaxation. This is supported by the significantly decreased salivary cortisol level in the forest. Cortisol is a major component of the physiological stress response and it is usually excreted in response to a stressor. (Lee et al. 96-97)

While the experiment does not touch on factors such as the physiological healing ability of human beings, it does prove to show positive results that nature does affect the body in a number

of ways not normally thought of. I believe this also holds true for psychological aspects in humans.

An example of this can be found and supported by a scene after the climax of *Princess Mononoke*. The attitudes of the people take a major tone shift after the head of the forest spirit is returned. The environment is slowly returning to its natural state before Irontown's establishment. While the trees have yet to return, the mountainsides' lush green glow astonishes the people, as if seeing true nature for the first time. The people of Irontown have been high strung throughout the duration, and it is at this scene that they become the calmest they have ever presented themselves to the audience. This would suggest a change in their psychological behavior. According to the results of the experiment within the article:

Psychological responses to environmental stimuli showed how differently the subjects felt in the two different environments. Profile of Mood States data supported the hypothesis that forests can increase the intensity of a positive mood state and decrease the intensity of a negative mood state, and that urban environments can increase a negative mood state. (Lee et al. 98)

Going by the results of this documented experiment, I believe it is this revitalized environment that helps bring the people to a state of relaxation. As further proof, the character Koroku states that he "didn't know the forest spirit made the flowers bloom." (Princess Mononoke) This one simple observation shows a true attention to detail about nature and the environment that no other character from Irontown has shown previously.

Japan is making strides to become more aware of the environmental issues that they face and are being active in searching for solutions. To point out these issues, I have used Hayao

Miyazaki's 1997 film, *Princess Mononoke*, to explore Japan's relationship with nature and the environment, as well as show how well they reflect each other. According to Iku Hori's article, "Can we Coexist with Nature? – Philosophical Reflections of *Princess Mononoke*":

But is depicted here is not the clear praise and critique of civilization and technology as seen in previous Miyazaki works. Instead, Miyazaki who was influenced by The Cultural Theory of Laurel Forests and Yoshihiko Amon's historical perspective, was able to solve the problem of human life and the fateful relationship with nature, which can never be solved. As a result of wonderfully capturing it in this work, it is distinguished from his other works (and other so - called, harmonious ecology works). (Hori 102)

This is meant to describe how Miyazaki sees the relationship with nature and how it is meant to reflect the environmental issues of Japan. The acts of deforestation and out of Japan for materials and resources, such as timber, how these acts affect the environment's ecosystems and how they endanger the wild life, and how Japan could lose all potential benefits of nature's forests if these acts do not cease.

Most of Japan's timber is imported from other countries, rather than domestically cutting down their own forests. Japan imports timber from countries like Malaysia and China, but an incredible percentage of Japan's timber is imported from Siberian forests. This poses a concern to citizens of Japan that their government could potentially do great harm to great forests outside of their own country due to an excessive demand for timber. Irontown from *Princess Mononoke* is a great reflection of what deforestation can look like. To protest this, three possible solutions have been brought forth. The first is protecting the forest as an interest of the public, so by stating the functions of the forest and how they benefit the public, the audiences will become aware of them. The second is protecting Japan's forests based on common values and needs of

the people. The idea is to make more use of domestic timber, which supports domestic industries and creates jobs. The last solution is to discourage the use of imported timber all together. By internalizing the problem, the people would not be able to ignore deforestation and find ways to reduce it. Deforestation can cause many problems, among them is how it endangers wild life within the ecosystem.

The Ryukyu long-furred rat is an example of endangered wild life in Japan. It is primarily located on the islands of Amami-ohshima, Tokuno-shima and Okinawa-jima in Japan. It is unfortunate, however, that acts such as deforestation have caused this species to be placed on Japan's red list of endangered species. These animals lose their homes because that ecosystem is destroyed, which can lead them to human territory, predator territory, or even a territory that is not in an abundance of what they normally consume to live. There is also the factor that the animals could also have untimely perished while deforestation was happening. This animal is a good representation of how animals can be treated in these processes, like the boars in the film. The boars were killed so that the forest could be cleared and harvested for materials, which resulted them into being hunted and killed, or potentially fled elsewhere. The Ryukyu long-furred rat is a prime example of how destruction of the environment does cause harm. Deforestation has caused this species of rodent to become endangered by forcing them into more dangerous territory, or they did not survive the deforestation process done by humans. These acts serve as a reminder of what is lost.

The people could potentially be deprived of the benefits they could receive from the forests in nature if they are destroyed. Through forest bathing, a person can receive various kinds of health benefits that they would normally get within urban areas. Forest bathing been proven to give a person a feeling of relaxation and reduce stress, where as being surrounded in an urban

city environment can be stressful and anxiety inducing. Exposure to nature can have positive effects on a person's physiological and psychological health, as Ashitaka and Koroku have demonstrated in the film.

Japanese environmentalism ideologies emerge in *Princess Mononoke*. Japan is a country with a culture that has always had strong ties to nature. Even though the film's setting is within the Muromachi period, it addresses realistic environmental issues that exist in modern Japan. It really demonstrates the beauty of nature and the strain of the relationship between man and nature, which is why I believe it is so important to reference when speaking about modern Japanese environmentalism.

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