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Taming the Wild: Approaches to Nature in Japanese Early Childhood Education

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The Japanese early childhood curriculum provides ample opportunities for children to interact with nature and to learn about natural phenomena. However, using Kalland (1995) and Martinez's (2008) theories about Japanese constructions of nature, this paper argues that most Japanese early childhood experiences do not constitute direct contact with 'nature in the raw' but rather present a tamed, managed version of nature's reality. Drawing on Japanese perceptions of nature, which contrast with the Cartesian world view attributed to the West, the natural environment is revealed as something to be venerated but also the object of revulsion through its potential to harbour pollution. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper argues that Japanese early childhood education reflects Kalland and Martinez's claims that nature in its pure form is not revered, but needs to be tamed and managed through rituals to become palatable.

Keywords: early childhood curriculum, natural environments, perceptions of nature

The Japanese early childhood curriculum emphasizes children becoming aware of their environment through outdoor experiences, contact with flora and fauna, and the use of songs and activities linked to the changing seasons. These experiences are designed to provide children with an opportunity to interact with nature and to learn about natural phenomena. However, the kinds of events and rituals *in*, *for* and *about* the natural environment (Palmer and Neale, 1994) take place within a shared framework constructed by the state and kindergarten teachers. This framework is not an overt feature of the Japanese early childhood curriculum, but one that has instead been constructed through implicit, shared understandings of how children should experience nature. Using Kalland

(1995) and Martinez's (2008) theories about Japanese constructions of nature, this paper argues that most Japanese early childhood experiences and rituals do not constitute direct contact with 'nature in the raw' but rather present a tamed, managed version of nature's reality.

The paper begins with a brief explanation of Japanese perceptions of nature, which contrast with the Cartesian world view attributed to the West (White, 1967). In the West, it is argued that the origins of interactions with nature remain rooted in Judaeo-Christian belief systems which emphasise humanity's domination of nature (Klein, 2000) in contrast to Japan where there is a more holistic approach. In reality, disregard for the environment and the ensuing environmental problems are just as prevalent in Japan as in the West (Kalland, 2002). This apparent contradiction is explained by scholars who argue that nature in its pure form is not revered in Japan, but needs to be tamed and managed through rituals to become palatable (Kalland, 1995; Martinez, 2008). The natural environment is at once something to be venerated but also the object of revulsion through its potential to harbour pollution (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

Based on fieldwork carried out at Oka Kindergarten[i] in Hokkaido, Japan, the dichotomies that prevail in the literature become apparent in the reality of the kindergarten space. Children attending the kindergarten are free to explore the unfenced boundaries of the playground which is surrounded by trees, flowers and a myriad of insects from spring to autumn. These activities are sanctioned as appropriate because they embody the ideology of *furusato* (home village) which idealises childhood as an idyllic time spent gathering flowers, catching insects and rolling on the grass (Knight, 2002; Robertson, 1988). Particularly in urban areas, outdoor play has come to be seen as one way to minimise the sanitised effects of modern lifestyles. In reality, however, contact with nature is always mediated and structured according to perceptions of the raw/wild and the tamed/managed. This idea is explored through a discussion of kindergarten rituals observed during fieldwork.

METHODOLOGY

Data is drawn from ethnographic research carried out at Oka Kindergarten in rural Hokkaido, Japan (Burke, 2013). Ethnographic researchers conduct fieldwork within the culture(s) they are studying, collect data on the basis of participation and observation, and then use theory to unpack this data (Ben-Ari & Van Bremen, 2005). The study draws on Joseph Tobin's *Preschool in three cultures* (PS3C) methodology (Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989; Tobin, Hseuh & Karasawa, 2009) which utilised film to present comparative views of early childhood education through the eyes of teachers.[ii] Fieldwork consisted of one month spent filming and observing at Oka Kindergarten, and concentrated on the experiences of a class of four year old children. To address issues of typicality, the video was shown to focus

groups of early childhood teachers and academics.[iii] All of these discussions were filmed and formed the basis for analysis, using a "classic analysis strategy" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p.118).

It is important to note that approaches to nature in Japanese early childhood education was not the specific focus of the original research. The data for this paper has been drawn from my comparative study of implicit cultural practice in early childhood education in New Zealand and Japan (Burke, 2013).[iv] The PS3C method uses film to uncover implicit cultural assumptions. In the case of my doctoral study, the empirical data was generated from hours of video, discussions, analysis and feedback from the participants in the two field sites and during the focus group sessions. This process resulted in very rich data resulting in 'the body' becoming the primary locus for my analysis. However, there were many interesting issues which also emerged but were cut due to space constraints in the main study. One of these was differing Japanese and New Zealand responses to the way nature was approached in each context. For this article, I have concentrated on Japan, as I believe there is very little in the literature which discusses environmental education in Japanese early childhood education. As the original study was conducted in the field of anthropology, I have drawn on the theories of anthropologists Kalland (1995) and Martinez (2008) to provide a useful framework to unpack the data.

The analysis combines both the month of observation, and that of the teachers' discussions. I had previously spent six years living in Japan, and three of those years teaching at Oka Kindergarten where fieldwork took place. My long-term relationship with Oka staff was a strong factor in choosing a field site, as a mutual level of trust was essential. In Japan, personal connections and introductions are vital to conducting research (Bestor et al, 2003). It was also important that the centre be considered as of good quality, and regarded as relatively representative of kindergartens across Japan. My three children were also born in Japan, and attended kindergarten there. This 'cultural capital' was a valuable asset to the project and to my understanding of the data (Bourdieu, 1983).

Japanese perceptions of nature

Unlike dominant Western views of nature, which draw on a Judaeo-Christian belief system emphasising dualism (Klein, 2000; White, 1967), the Japanese do not make the distinction between man and nature, but see the two realms as intrinsically connected (Lebra & Lebra, 1986, p.4). The Japanese sense of nature has been presented as a dichotomy by scholars as Japanese people identify themselves as being very sensitive to nature yet Japan is is notable for its environmental problems both within the country and outside it (Kalland, 1995; Martinez, 2008). Kalland (1995) claims that the widespread view of Japanese society as nature-loving is a misconception derived from Japanese admiration for nature expressed through the arts and literature. It has been argued that the main difference between

European and Japanese notions of nature lie in the terms which describe it. In Japanese the word for nature (*shizen)* contains the character for "self" which contrasts with European ideas which view nature as something to be conquered at the hands of humans. These ideas are linked to Cartesian concepts of the "mind/body dualism and Platonic notions of nature as something outside that needs to be understood" (Martinez, 2008, p.186).

Martinez (2008) claims that while the Japanese do not appear to share the European predilection to dominate nature, they show a desire to trim, shape and work on nature. This view is echoed by Kalland (1995) who suggests that the Japanese seek to control and conquer nature by altering its natural state to a more controlled, tamed form. He draws on Buruma (1985) to argue that many Japanese appear repulsed by 'nature in the raw' (*nama no shizen*) and it is only by a process of taming (*narasu*) or idealisation that nature can become acceptable or admired. This process can take the form of paintings, poems, sculptures, novels, or even manicured gardens. "Nature can be both raw and cooked, wild and tamed. Torn by destructive and creative forms, nature oscillates between its raw and cooked forms, and in its cooked form nature and culture merge. It is in this latter state, as idealized nature, that nature is loved by most Japanese" (Kalland, 1995, p.246). The classic example of this idea is the bonsai.

Even the Japanese landscape has been metaphorically tamed through a hierarchical ranking of the nation's most beautiful places. Kalland suggests that their beauty stems less from actual reality than from classification as such by tourist boards or the admiration of a famous artist. In contrast to the environmental protection stance taken by many other countries, Japan's designated beauty spots are peppered with hotels, highways and vending machines so that the maximum number of people can become "one with nature" (Kalland, 1995, p.252). Martinez (2008) argues that Japanese experiences of and attitudes to nature are no longer linked to class, as in the past, but split along the lines of urban versus rural dwellers. Urban dwellers experiences of nature are increasingly typified by limited visits to the 'real' Japan and the people who inhabit that endangered rural space.

Constructing *furusato* within nature

These ideas have been explored by Knight (2002) who has evoked notions of *furusato* (home village or native place) in discussions about nature. Knight suggests that in modern, urban Japan the *furusato* can be found in the rural village set in green fields edged by vertiginous mountains. Within this setting the activities of childhood are remembered as taking place in the forest or the hills: gathering herbs, catching insects, playing in the river, and running in the long grass. Cave (2007) notes that the educational reforms implemented in Japanese schools in 2002 seemed to come from this place of imagined nostalgia for a Japan that was rich in opportunities to engage with the natural world. Children themselves

are often linked to nature in Japanese literature with metaphors of plant cultivation used for childrearing (Chen, 1996).

Knight (2002) draws on the writings of Japanese scholars Tanaka (1996) and Ogawa (1993) who express concern that for Japanese children these experiences are not only much rarer, natural spaces are increasingly regarded as dirty or dangerous by modern mothers. Villagers interviewed by Knight felt that without time to enjoy unrestricted play in the forests or mountains, children will grow up without a tangible link to their local area, in other words, with no love for their *furusato*. In an attempt to overcome this problem rural tourism has been promoted extensively in urban areas. While in some cases this has resulted in swathes of natural land being saved in the belief that the forest is the "children's playground" (Knight, 2002, p.280) in other areas rapid development has occurred to accommodate swelling numbers of domestic tourists in the countryside.

Japanese cosmology does not differentiate between deity, man and beast, yet there is a clear distinction between inside (*uchi)* and outside *(soto*) (Lebra, 2004). Linked by a complex set of mutual obligations, gifts and services, the inside world of social interactions is familiar and comforting to its members. The outside world, in contrast, is threatening and unpredictable. This is true of one's social world and of nature. In a country which regularly faces natural disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes and floods, the Japanese fear nature as they simultaneously try to tame it (Kalland, 1995).

Nature itself is not seen as specifically dirty but care must be taken to avoid contamination through contact with an omnipresent outside (*soto*) where germs are located (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). This fear of the outside is fostered from childhood as a significant contrast to "the safety and indulgence of the inside" (Hendry, 1986, p.113). As children's lives become more sheltered and sanitised, nature remains the last frontier to be explored, yet the potential risks are increasingly under scrutiny, both within the early childhood context and in the world beyond.

The risks and pleasures of engaging with nature

There has been a notable increase in the literature concerning children's lack of opportunities to experience and explore the natural environment in comparison to previous generations (Freeman and Tranter, 2011; Louv, 2005; Ouvry 2000). Children have gone from playing unsupervised in outdoor environments to being the ultimate consumers of controlled, sanitised entertainment (Stearns, 2003). Freeman and Tranter (2011, p.163) call the loss of positive natural experiences "environmental amnesia", reflecting children's contact with increasingly degraded outdoor environments which eventually become the norm. Nature is being positioned more and more as something to be feared and avoided (Louv, 2005). In Japan, Klein (2000) has questioned how the invention of fictive animals such

as the *tamagochi* diminishes opportunities for children to engage with the natural world on its own terms through the experience of birth, life and death. As Klein points out even if children neglect to feed the *tamagochi* it can be reborn after death. These popular children's toys represent a distortion of the natural world by technology.

The scholarly discussions about children's interactions with the natural environment are reflected in the approaches taken by teachers at Oka Kindergarten who expressed their desire to have nature (*shizen*) prominent in children's early childhood experience. At the same time, the need to minimise risk and protect children from the less pleasant aspects of nature was a strong theme.

The concept of boundaries is a useful means of illustrating the contrasting approaches to nature, risk and children's freedom. In the Japanese early childhood context, access to nature, and an understanding of its importance, is viewed as an integral part of early childhood education. The category of 'environment' forms one of the five key components of the Japanese kindergarten curriculum and goals for children include becoming acquainted with the environment by coming into contact with nature in their daily lives, as well as observing and handling natural phenomena such as plants and animals. More specifically the curriculum urges children to notice the size, beauty and wonder of nature, to notice the impact of the seasons on people's lives and to develop feelings of respect towards natural creatures (Ministry of Education, Science, Sports & Culture, 2001).

Unlike Western cultures, such as New Zealand, where enclosed fences and spring-loaded gates are realities of the modern centre, at Oka Kindergarten large parts of the playground remain unfenced.[v] The Oka principal believes that it is important for children to able to meander freely to the edge of the woods beside the centre to pick flowers or catch dragonflies. In a reflection of *furusato* ideology (Knight, 2002), there are no structural boundaries in place to either restrain or contain children. With a roll of over 150 children and eight teachers there are plenty of opportunities for children to wander off during the free play time but this is rarely a problem due to peer monitoring. Strong social controls remain in place to minimise risk and children are given a great deal responsibility for managing their own safety (Walsh, 2002).

Outdoor activities that may not be condoned in Western early childhood contexts are a surprising feature for foreign visitors. American educationalist Daniel Walsh (2004) has described children at a Japanese kindergarten climbing a tree so tall that it made him feel nervous. The tree was located in an area that the teachers rarely visited and it appeared that they hadn't noticed what was going on. In fact, the tree climbing had been discussed at length but it was decided that the teachers would neither intervene nor supervise the area in order to encourage the children's independence and vigilance when climbing. The teachers also reasoned that the tree climbing afforded a good opportunity for the older

children to take responsibility for the younger children in terms of boundaries and safety. For Japanese children boundaries relating to the natural environment and risk seem less likely to be concerned with issues of supervision or prevention of accidents, but more often connected to concepts of pollution and the body. Kindergarten rituals are carefully constructed, so that the less desirable aspects of nature are minimised or eliminated, as the following section explains.

The rituals of nature

As part of the national curriculum, kindergarten children learn about the life cycle of various plants and animals. Instruction usually takes the form of learning relevant songs, reading books together and a practical opportunity to grow a vegetable or fruit, or observe an evolving insect. In the case of Oka Kindergarten, children are able to take part in planting and harvesting potatoes at the kindergarten plot located a short walk from the centre. This event is clearly marked on the teaching calendar written at the beginning of the year. The potato planting (*imoue*) takes place in late May when the frozen Hokkaido ground has thawed sufficiently for the bus driver to be able to hoe the soil into rich clods and harvest (*imohari*) is carried out at the end of August before the weather begins to cool again. For this exercise the children are instructed to come prepared with a set of cotton gloves, gumboots, smocks to cover their clothing, a trowel and their class caps.

Suitably attired from head to toe, the children set off to the potato plot in their class lines where each one gets to drop a seed into the dirt, cover it with their trowel and then move off so their classmate can do the same. Once all the children have finished and returned to their classes the bus driver rakes over the ground and ensures all the seeds are covered before giving the plot a good watering. The harvest follows a similar pattern and when the children return to their classrooms they are served up a steaming bowl of potato and pork stew (*nikujaga*) from potatoes that have been purchased earlier from the supermarket.[vi] Each child is then given a handful of the harvested potatoes to take home in a plastic bag.

The potato planting and harvest are events that are both greatly anticipated and enjoyed by the children and teachers at the kindergarten. Oka Kindergarten teachers explain that these practices are useful ways to get children connected with nature and to appreciate where their food comes from. Throughout it all, however, the children are protected from physically coming into contact with the dirt through the barriers provided by the cotton gloves on their hands, the gumboots on their feet and the smocks over their clothing.

Figure 1. Children at an urban Japanese kindergarten plant seedlings in the vegetable plot.

Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) argues that Japanese notions of germs (*baikin*) and hygiene have less to do with actual risks to one's health but rather are cultural concepts located within a framework of pollution and purity. While washing may exist in most cultures, the Japanese are unusual in their emphasis on cleansing certain body parts, such as the hands and feet, as they are where the body comes into contact with the outside. Regular times for washing one's hands are slotted into the kindergarten day, yet even after cleansing the hands are still seen as vulnerable to dirt (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

As Hendry (1986) has argued, a fear of the outside (*soto*) is cultivated in children from a young age, as a contrast to the sanctuary of the inside world (*uchi*). However, the notion that the outside equates with dirt and fear has been rejected by some radical sectors of Japanese society such as supporters of the 'back-to-nature' movement studied by Knight (1997). Influenced by the Buddhist concept of nothingness (*mu*) these 'natural farmers' reject almost all treatment of the field such as fertiliser, weeding or ploughing. Some of these families have withdrawn their children from school in the belief that the education system instills a certain way of thinking which separates the young from nature. These parents claim that children take a natural delight in playing in areas such as the paddy field and the forest but through the school system they are taught to see such places as dirty (*kitanai*) and frightening (*kowai*).

They believe these negative views of nature carry through to adulthood and account for why families no longer work and play together in places like the paddy field. Instead, modern children are to be found playing 'safely' inside with their electronic companions.

This sense of vulnerability is not limited to engaging with the outside world (*soto*) itself, but extends to the flora, fauna and creatures within it. As the following section discusses, cultural constructions of nature define which creatures are benign and those which may represent a threat.

Constructing fauna in the playground

As the Hokkaido winter is so long and harsh, Oka Kindergarten teachers see it as important that as many assemblies as possible are held out in the fresh air. Once the chill winds of autumn begin these gatherings are once again conducted inside the kindergarten hall. At each assembly a short talk is given by staff to draw children's attention to notices or upcoming events, and during the warmer months discussions about insects regularly feature. Some insects such as the dragonfly (*tombo*) symbolise the welcome arrival of summer (Laurent, 2000), but others like the wasp (*suzumebachi*) represent a tangible threat to children's safety (Parry, 2005). The curriculum encourages kindergarten children to acknowledge "the importance of life, appreciating and respecting it through experiences of becoming familiar with surrounding animals and plants" (Ministry of Education Science Sports Culture and Technology, 2008). Yet, at Oka Kindergarten, it was not uncommon to see adult female teachers shriek and go pale in front of a class of preschoolers just because a moth had flown into the room. Children are warned to not to touch caterpillars, but the capture of a stag beetle is an occasion for celebration.

The ways in which fauna are designated and defined varies across cultures (Raffles, 2011). Using the insect as a case study can show how children's interactions with natural creatures in the early childhood setting can reveal aspects of a culture's view of nature (Edwards, Moore & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2012). More specifically, the way in which insects are classified and approached at Oka Kindergarten reflects a clear preference for those perceived as 'tamed' and a rejection of more 'wild' species (Martinez, 2008).

Laurent (1995) has suggested that the importance of connections between culture, people and their direct environment is often overlooked. His study focussed on the significance of *mushi* to Japanese culture. While *mushi* might be initially dismissed as a zoological category such as 'insects' in English, Laurent argues that in a Japanese context *mushi* constitutes a much wider group to become an ethno-category which he defines as "a category of thinking bound to a specific culture or peculiar traits of a given culture" (Laurent, 1995, p.62). Laurent's research found that concepts of *mushi* differed according to age and gender with young men playing with *mushi* and viewing them essentially as insects; older men having a broader, traditional view and knowledge of *mushi* and women showing little interest. He notes that this gender divide seems to occur from childhood when boys are encouraged to play with *mushi* while girls are kept inside away from such dirty creatures. In rural areas feminine fears of *mushi* are seen in a positive light and Laurent recounts stories of panic in

women encountering butterflies or worms. However, the type of *mushi* affects Japanese reactions to it as Japanese distinguish between degrees of *mushi*-ness.

Laurent's ideas resonate with Kalland's (1995) argument that the Japanese prefer their nature tamed and classified. Laurent found that creatures such as the firefly (*hotaru*) and the silkworm (*kaiko*) are beloved in Japanese society. They feature in literature, songs, proverbs and legends and they are also viewed, bred and touched. When asked if the firefly and the silkworm were *mushi*, participants were hesitant to classify them as such but finally agreed with the adjunct that these creatures were more civilised or cultured than other *mushi*. Laurent (1995, p.68) notes that "the criteria seem to be a matter of rusticity and robustness as opposed to culture and refinement. The wild species are bigger, darker, and stronger, connoting to Japanese *stranger, wilder*". The type of movement used by *mushi* can also be linked to fear. Sudden and uncontrollable movements such as those exhibited by moths and butterflies are seen as particularly frightening. Unlike the positive images evoked by the firefly and silkworm, many *mushi* are seen negatively by Japanese people as epitomised by the saying "to hate something as much as a hairy caterpillar" (*kemushi no yo ni kirai*).

Studies of anxiety in Japanese and German children predicted that Japanese child-rearing practices would make them more anxious about separation from parents or social phobias than the German sample but in fact the results showed this not to be the case. Japanese children scored most highly on physical injury fears which included fear of insects, spiders, the dark and dogs (Essau et al, 2004). Another cross-cultural study found the Japanese participants to be much more afraid of spiders than those in the five other countries examined (Davey et al, 1998). Researchers in these cases were unable to ascertain the root cause of these fears.

The Japanese early childhood curriculum aims to provide opportunities for children to make sense of their natural environment. However, cultural beliefs about insects can determine the level and quality of the interaction. While appealing insects such as the dragonfly (*tombo*) and ant (*ari*) are often the subject of observation and class project work at Oka Kindergarten, other less attractive creatures like the caterpillar (*kemushi*) rarely feature. Art projects are regularly accompanied by moral tales which personify the insects through descriptions of their commendable or corrupt actions. Macanbelli (2002) argues that few insects are represented in Japanese folk tales, with the exception of the dragonfly which is associated with wealth. However, Mayer (1981) found that other insects such as the ant, the bee, the fly and the louse also feature. Within the kindergarten classroom, these insects are frequently revered for their work ethic.

Another example of an insect rooted in Japanese symbolic meaning is the horned beetle (*kabuto mushi*) whose startling appearance is considered ugly by Western standards. Yet,

this insect is very popular as a children's pet in Japan. The *kabuto* of the insect's name means samurai helmet and this linguistic link conjures notions of bravery and honour. As a result, the insect has come to symbolise good fortune and wealth (Macanbelli, 2002). While children once used their abilities to catch beetles in the wild, *kabuto mushi* are now more often purchased from pet stores along with plastic cases, bedding, food and even humidifiers to prevent dehydration. During the summer months at Oka Kindergarten, at least one class would have a plastic encased beetle on display, the ultimate symbol of nature tamed for commodification by children and adults (Kalland, 1995; Martinez, 2008).

Re-presenting nature in the classroom

As well as encouraging children to become aware of their natural environment through contact with flora and fauna, the Japanese kindergarten curriculum emphasises the use of songs and activities linked to the changing seasons (Yamamoto, 2011). Japan's four seasons are widely extolled throughout the country and remain a favourite subject for artists, writers and poets (Asquith & Kalland, 1997). Rituals such as the cherry blossom viewing picnics held in the spring (*hanami*) and trips to see the changing colours of the autumn leaves (*kōyō)* are regular, constant events in the lives of most Japanese. Letters written between friends and acquaintances in Japan usually begin with a reference to the weather or the season.

In recognition of the important part the environment plays in their daily lives, there are also many songs which have been written to celebrate the joys of nature. In autumn, children sing of the *donguri* (acorn) while during winter and summer references are made to snowmen (*yukidaruma*) and sunflowers (*himawari*). One of the most well-known songs children learn is *Sakura, Sakura* (Cherry blossom) which is a simple tune able to be mastered even by those who don't speak Japanese. It is taught to children during the month of March, when spring is said to have arrived in Japan. The fact that there is often still snow on the ground in the northern island of Hokkaido does not prevent it being sung by kindergarten children there along with thousands of other children across the country. Activities at Japanese kindergartens are shaped by teachers' use of standardised texts throughout the country, resulting in 'appropriate' seasonal activities being dictated by the climate of populous central Japan (Ben-Ari, 2002). Nature is therefore repositioned, or tamed, to fit into a suitable teaching schedule that may bear little relevance to what children at Oka Kindergarten are experiencing outside their window.

Even the names of the classes at Oka Kindergarten are drawn from nature with the tulip, dandelion, chrysanthemum, morning glory, cherry blossom and lily all represented. Made by the teachers, artfully arranged cardboard representations of each flower stand at the entranceway to each class for easy recognition. At Oka Kindergarten, children are expected to produce pastel drawings and paintings of iconic symbols of nature at the appropriate

time of the year. *Origami* (paper folding) also features strongly on the schedule with the classroom walls adorned with paper cherry blossoms in spring and strawberries in summer. Arts and crafts projects also reflect the seasons but it is notable that few of them actually incorporate raw natural resources. Missing from the Japanese context are the imperfect creations made from foraged sticks, leaves or pebbles that are the mainstay of New Zealand centres (Duhn, Bachmann & Harris, 2010; Ritchie, 2010).

It is in the paper flowers and painted landscapes that Kalland (1995) and Martinez's (2008) claims of a Japanese preference for a tamed version of nature can be seen most clearly. While the changing seasons of nature may be celebrated in Japan, actual paraphernalia from nature is not widely used in the kindergarten classroom. Most of the resources used at Oka Kindergarten are manmade and quite often plastic. Decorations on the wall are similarly constructed out of bright, new pieces of cardboard that the teachers have cut, assembled and glued into attractive characters or motifs.

Figure 2. The wall of this Japanese centre is decorated with references to the season: cosmos and carnation flowers overseen by swallows.

In order to make seasonal flowers or fruits which celebrate the bounty of nature, children at Oka Kindergarten are given a new sheet of cardboard to draw on or fresh squares of coloured origami paper to fold into shape. The stationery area of the kindergarten contains large shelving units which house a huge array of paper of different textures, colours and

sizes. This is supplemented by supplies of cardboard, foil, pipe cleaners, crayons, cotton wool, glitter and ribbons. All of this equipment is new and teachers can select from the stationery area any time they require materials for children's art sessions or to make decorations for their classrooms.

Where are the resources foraged from nature?

While using natural resources may seem patently obvious in early childhood contexts elsewhere (Prince, 2010; White et al., 2008), both from an ideological and economic point of view, they do not feature strongly at Oka Kindergarten. The area of Hokkaido where the kindergarten is situated is famous as a timber producing area and presumably there are a large number of off cuts and wood products that could be sourced for free. However, while Oka promotes itself as using natural materials, the preference is clearly for new products rather than those donated from the local community or foraged from the environment. The kindergarten is notable for its beautifully made wooden toys, large wooden blocks and even bins of polished wooden balls to play in.

Drawing on the arguments of Kalland (1995) and Martinez (2008), it would appear that recycled materials do not have the same pure, clean, unpolluted feel to them that many Japanese prefer. The possibility of natural resources being interpreted as either dirty or a sign of poverty was brought up by an Oka Kindergarten teacher who had seen the use of recycled resources in an overseas centre. Her initial reaction was to assume that the kindergarten must be terribly under-resourced if the children had to play with rubbish instead of appropriate materials.

Japan has a strong tradition of recycling, and residents are required to carefully sort household rubbish for collection. However, as Kirby (2011) has described, Japanese beliefs regarding purity and pollution dictate how waste is classified, and how objects may come to be seen as hygienic or dirty. While carefully cleaned food trays, jars and tins are deemed suitable for use at Oka Kindergarten, objects foraged directly from nature are not. If the outside world (*soto*) is inherently seen as polluting (Hendry, 1986), then it is possible that objects taken from this sphere also retain some of their polluting qualities, rendering them unsuitable for handling by children. One of the first words children learn is *bacchi* or dirty which is taught by adults repeatedly identifying objects that are unclean and therefore should not be touched (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

The concept of polluted objects and spaces become so ingrained by early childhood, that children sometimes exploit this fear of dirt by starting to sit down on a dirty surface so adults will carry them. The belief that the outdoors is a dirty space is also reflected in objects that mothers are expected to purchase as part of their children's essential kindergarten equipment. For example, every child is required to own a colourful square of

plastic sheeting that compactly folds away. This *re-ja sheeto* (leisure sheet) is used to spread over the ground and sit upon when the children go on trips to the local park or gardens. Just as nature may be most beloved in a sculpted bonsai (Martinez, 2008), children at Oka Kindergarten learn to enjoy nature mediated through protective equipment and clothing, and during ritualised excursions into 'the wild'.

Figure 3. A wide range of commercially produced wooden resources can be seen at this early childhood centre in Hokkaido.

Nature as an antidote to modern lifestyles

From the above examples, it appears that nature seems to be at its most beautiful when re-presented at a distance in the form of art, songs and managed rituals at Oka Kindergarten. However, teachers are aware that children today are living in a world that bears little resemblance to the *furusato* ideal of natural bliss. To mitigate modern lifestyles teachers create opportunities for children to spend time outside, *in* the environment (Palmer and Neal, 1994).

At Oka Kindergarten, children are encouraged to spend at least some part of the day outside regardless of the weather. In the middle of the harsh Hokkaido winter this translates to weeks of sub-zero temperatures but children simply don the appropriate clothing and adapt their play to the conditions. Memories of kindergarten in northern Japan are peppered with time spent constructing tunnels and slides out of fresh snow and packed

ice. The notion that children should experience all facets of the environment regardless of the weather can also be seen in the approach of the 'naked kindergartens' where children wear minimal clothing all year round. In an interview in a Japanese newspaper, the principal of one of these kindergartens stated that "the meaning of this is to bring kids closer to nature'' (Naked education: Learning to undress for success, 1990).

These ideas have parallels with Nordic countries that have attempted to mitigate negative changes in children's outdoor play habits. Swedish children head outside to play each day regardless of the conditions claiming "there's no bad weather, only bad clothing" (Lancy, 2008, p.198). In Denmark, Gulløv (2003) has drawn on nostalgia as influencing the creation of so-called 'forest kindergartens'. These centres are very popular with middle class parents who want their children to learn to interact in with nature in a more 'authentic' way than is possible in their urban home environments.[vii] Within the forest kindergarten children spend their time collecting berries, building huts and making small fires to cook on. Gulløv (2003, p.27) suggests that the forest kindergartens have created a new, discrete space for children in the hope that materialism can be "countered by the possibilities offered by nature".

Just as Nordic countries draw on nostalgia to promote outdoor experiences in the early childhood context, activities at Oka Kindergarten reflect a desire to return to a simpler lifestyle that is more in touch with nature. However, these activities are mediated through time, space and bodily wrappings. Appropriate clothing must be donned for interacting with the outdoors, whether it is ski-wear in winter, or a swimsuit during water play. Children and staff are expected to 'unwrap' the layers surrounding the body before engaging in vigorous play with mud, dirt or water. The body is then be cleaned and 'rewrapped' before returning to the internal space of the classroom (Hendry, 1993). The time assigned for free play is strictly adhered to, and children must return to the classroom on the sound of a bell. While the grounds may not be fenced, children know not to travel across the unseen boundaries delineating between the safety of the kindergarten and the unpredictable outside world. These experiences bear little resemblance to *furusato* ideology which positions children as wandering freely outdoors, collecting insects and flowers, soil trailing from hands and feet (Robertson, 1998).

Reflecting on nature

This paper has argued that a desire to 'tame the wild' can be seen in the rituals and structures of the Japanese kindergarten (Kalland, 1995; Martinez, 2008). Kalland and Asquith (1997) have discussed the enduring myth of the Japanese love of nature which contends that the Japanese have managed to live harmoniously with nature in contrast to Westerners alleged desire to conquer her. An ancient appreciation for nature's aesthetic beauty combined with religious beliefs that natural phenomena were sentient beings has led to nature being widely revered in Japan. Images of nature remain ubiquitously linked to

modern advertisements for Japanese events or products (Moon, 1997; Moeran & Skov, 1997). Kalland and Asquith (1997) argue that Japanese views are not only complex, they are constantly evolving and context specific. Western debates suggest that nature exists in two forms: wild and untamed or domesticated and aesthetic. While the former is often despised by Japanese, the latter form of nature is linked with culture and generally adored by Japanese. The view that nature is something to be controlled, sanitised or even feared is not limited to Japan (Louv, 2005). Japanese efforts to try to perfect and aesthetically objectify nature correspond with Judeo-Christian world views which seek to control the environment.

The complexity of Japanese approaches to nature may offer an explanation for the contradictory practices and rituals observed at Oka Kindergarten. While Oka teachers claim that they are close to nature, in reality many of their practices reflect a risk discourse which sees them managing nature to make it less threatening, and more palatable. Children must wear gloves to harvest potatoes, and spread plastic sheets upon the ground, lest they come into contact with raw soil. Flora is recreated in crisp cardboard, and fauna that has been classified as 'more cultured' is favoured for class work. While teachers understand children's need for experiences in nature, these experiences are shaped within the ideology of *furusato* (Robertson, 1998). An activity such as tree climbing, which is deemed too risky in many early childhood centres worldwide (Louv, 2005) is supported as it links to beliefs about children's bodies needing physical challenge (Walsh, 2004). Rituals and activities that fall outside Japanese definitions of tamed nature are less welcome.

While a structured curriculum at the Oka Kindergarten means that children's activities may pay close attention to the rhythm of the seasons, the products of these sessions are artificial and stylised images of nature. This approach serves to detach, isolate and objectify raw nature and to deny the intrinsic value of conserving and protecting nature of and for itself. The children are not really engaging proactively to protect and enhance the natural world around them. There is little sign of fostering a truly sustainable conservation ethic that would lie in opposition to the dominant values of consumerism and materialism that have become so influential in Japan, and on a global scale. Instead children's actions and practices mirror the curriculum guidelines which focus more on involvement *about* the environment (Palmer & Neal, 1994). Although teachers and children are trying to have more meaningful interactions with the environment, it is still a long way from the nature-centred approach that can be seen in Nordic countries (Gulløv, 2003; Duncan, 2006). The way in which Japanese early childhood teachers and children engage with nature reflects their cultural values. Despite claiming to respect and revere the environment, a desire to dominate and control nature can be seen in the choices made about practice and policy at Oka Kindergarten. All of the examples discussed in this paper represent a desire for nature to be experienced not in her raw, untamed form, but as a managed, tamed version of herself, as described by Kalland (1995) and Martinez (2008).

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[i] A fictitious name has been given for the kindergarten.

[ii] For more detail about how Tobin et al.'s methodology was used for this study, see Burke (2013).

[iii] In Japan, focus group sessions were held in Tokyo, Saitama, Osaka, Eniwa and three in Kutchan. Two sessions were conducted in Christchurch with groups from Hiroshima and Nara. The groups were made up of teachers (practitioners currently working in an ECE setting) and academics (working or teaching in the field of ECE in tertiary institutions).

[iv] Ethics approval was given for this study through the Massey University Ethics Committee in Auckland, New Zealand.

[v] Although it is common to see playgrounds that are not completely fenced in rural Hokkaido, urban centres in other parts of Japan enforce more stringent structural boundaries.

[vi] When I queried them about the use of store bought potatoes, the teachers could see no contradiction between their actions and the lesson on nature. The *nikujaga* potatoes are pre-purchased and prepared as a way of dealing efficiently with the large class numbers, and the teachers reasoned that the children would still get to taste the harvested potatoes at home with their families.

[vii] As Gulløv points out, this aim is somewhat paradoxical as children are encouraged to be self-managing within the kindergarten space yet the very creation of such centres reflect the increasing protection of childhood.

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