

Environment-Friendly Consumers

By Ato Ekusa

Environment-friendly products are becoming all the rage in Japan, an industrialized country that has had its share of serious pollution problems in the past. One of the most well-known and devastating of these problems was Minamata disease—mercury poisoning from industrially contaminated water and fish that was first diagnosed in the fishing villages around Minamata City in Kumamoto Prefecture. Now companies are busy developing goods that prevent such pollution and environmental destruction.

Since consumers have become more aware of the importance of protecting the environment in recent years, companies have come to realize that they can boost their image, and also their sales, by manufacturing and marketing environment-friendly products. Competition in this field has intensified, and the market is expected to grow.

The first type of environment-friendly product is the resource-saving kind. Keio Department Store in Tokyo has begun using shopping bags that contain 20% recycled paper, such as old newspapers, and wrapping paper that contains 70% recycled paper. According to a spokesperson, the store hands out as many as 6.5 million shopping bags annually. By using recycled paper, it saves 2,000 trees a year.

The Japanese Consumers' Cooperative Union has developed tissues entirely from recycled paper, with 90% of the material coming from used milk cartons. In

three years it collected 35 million used milk cartons from members throughout Japan and used them to manufacture 200,000 cases of tissue paper. This project not only conserves resources but also prevents the discharge of polluted water and reduces the amount of domestic garbage that piles up.

An automobile tire manufacturer has contributed to the conservation of resources by developing and marketing recyclable tires.

The second type of environment-friendly product serves to prevent pollution of the environment. As suggested by reports that the country's forests are perishing as a result of acid rain, Japan's environment is deteriorating year by year. Companies have responded by developing products that prevent pollution.

For example, a maker of household electrical appliances has marketed an air-conditioning system that emits less nitrogen oxide, which contaminates the air inside a room. An agricultural equipment manufacturer has developed a rice-planting machine that reduces the discharge of such fertilizers as nitrogen and inorganic phosphorus, which pollute the water in nearby rivers, lakes and marshes. A furniture maker has developed a filter for kitchen waste. A housing construction firm has developed a prefabricated soundproof room. And another electrical appliance maker has invented a noiseless washing machine and vacuum cleaner.

Suntory Ltd. now sells cans of beer with stay-on tabs instead of throwaway tabs, which often cause injuries when left on beaches and other places where people walk about in bare feet. According to a spokesperson, stay-on tabs are already used on 85% of Suntory's total production, and the company receives many inquiries from such places as campsites. Other beer companies are beginning to follow suit and thereby boost their reputation as environment-conscious firms.

Daiei Inc., a supermarket chain, sells polyethylene bags that decompose when



These "environment-friendly" canned drinks have a stay-on tab. A message on the can reads "Let us watch our lifestyle and the earth."

exposed to light and disposable chopsticks made from wood from thinned-out trees. Chopsticks are an indispensable part of Japanese life, but disposable ones, which are widely used in restaurants and at parties, have been strongly criticized as a waste of timber resources. Most of the cheaper disposable chopsticks are, however, made from the wood obtained when forests are routinely thinned out to encourage growth, not from the wood obtained by chopping down healthy trees.

Today, cosmetics firms are selling sprays that do not use any chlorofluorocarbons, which are said to destroy the stratospheric ozone layer that protects the earth from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. And in an attempt to eliminate mercury pollution, another company has invented a dry battery using zinc and air.

The Environment Agency provided the stimulus for this spate of new products in 1987, when it introduced the "ecology mark" for excellent environment-friendly goods. The idea was that private companies, which used to be the cause of outbreaks of industrial pollution, would compete with one another to come up with safe products if they knew they could obtain the prestigious "ecology mark" and thereby boost their sales. In the process, they would be contributing to improving the quality of the environment. The agency took its cue from the former West Germany, which successfully introduced a similar system in 1978. More than 30 types of product have received the "ecology mark" in Japan so far.

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Toilet paper made entirely from recycled paper.

Photo: JCCU

Photo: Japanese Consumers' Cooperative Union