

# NGOs don't hold breath over COP3

## Hard issues may get short shrift amid climate talks' festive nature

By ERIC JOHNSTON

Staff writer

KYOTO — With the COP3 summit on global warming less than a month away, local, national and international environmental activists are preparing to attend what all hope, but not many expect, will be a successful event.

It is in many ways fitting that COP3, the Third Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, is taking place in this picturesque city, home to a large number of well-known environmental activists from Japan and abroad.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and most publicly committed to not only environmental issues but also human rights is American David Kubiak.

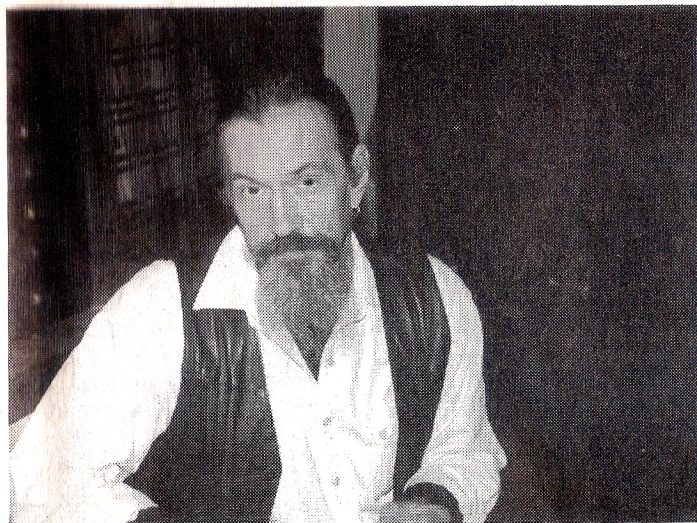
Teacher, activist, and, a 1994 candidate for "virtual" mayor of Kyoto, Kubiak has lived in Japan for 17 years.

He is also a contributing editor to *Kyoto Journal*, an award-winning quarterly that strongly advocates environmental preservation, human rights and local autonomy.

At the moment, the Japanese media are paying a lot of attention to the role of non-governmental organizations at COP3, especially that of Kiko Forum, which consists of over 200 Japanese NGOs.

But for Kubiak, form is taking precedence over substantial debate.

"COP3 is turning into a traditional Japanese 'matsuri' (festival)," he said. "There is



**AMERICAN ACTIVIST David Kubiak, at his home in Kyoto, discusses the December climate conference in the ancient capital.** ERIC JOHNSTON PHOTO

not going to be any significant strategy to deal with greenhouse gases that will be decided upon by either the NGOs or the COP3 representatives."

Why? Because NGOs, like the organizers of COP3, Kubiak says, are ignoring more fundamental issues, including the primary cause of excess greenhouse gases: corporate dominance of the environmental agenda.

"In a recent poll by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 71 percent of those surveyed said they would be willing to take cuts in their lifestyle to improve the environment," Kubiak said. "In any functioning democratic society, such strong public approval should dictate policy changes, especially if people are willing to sacrifice.

"However, the manufacturing sector in Japan does not want to sacrifice. Whether it's the fossil fuel industries, including nuclear power, or the construction industry, the technical people in Japan run the show."

Although one might assume that, with over 200 groups, Kiko Forum could play a large part in helping the Japanese government frame the environmental debate, Kubiak says his experience as an activist makes him skeptical.

"In Japan, all NGOs are basically single-issue entities," he said. "In the case of Kiko Forum, each group had to be invited with the promise that they will get conference time and media attention."

As a result, Kiko Forum members include everyone from those opposed to rain

forest destruction to those against high-rise buildings to foes of nuclear power.

"There's a whole spectrum of unconnected NGOs, all of whom are trying to get a little piece of the action and demanding one or two lines in the final declaration," Kubiak said.

Of all the COP3 issues, debate over what percentage greenhouse gases should be reduced has received the most attention. The European Union wants a 15 percent cut from 1990 levels, Japan wants a flexible cut of no more than 5 percent and the U.S. says, essentially, 1990 levels should be the goal.

Already speculation as to the success or failure of the conference has come down to an argument over the final numbers, an argument that Kubiak says is pointless.

"Everyone is fighting as if there were some huge moral difference in, say, a 2.5 percent vs. a 7 percent reduction," he said. "The fact is, the final percentage everyone agrees to will be so low as to be meaningless."

Also disturbing is that little attention is being paid to serious scientific research on other energy sources that don't burn fossil fuels.

"At a recent meeting of Kiko Forum, I complained there was nothing in their NGO declaration about serious alternative energy sources," Kubiak said. "Some say solar energy is the answer. But, in the U.S., solar energy holds half of the market it did 10 years ago and is clearly not a

viable alternative.

"So, you can either stick with the mantras of the ultra-radical greens, who want solar power, or you can look for something else that really works. But when you try to talk about alternative energy like hydrogen or cold fusion, the NGOs don't want to hear about it."

The reason for the indifference, Kubiak says, is that the organizations are focused on tactical issues and cannot see or are not interested in pursuing cross links with others that share some of the same concerns.

He blames the Japanese media for bringing about this sort of apathy.

"There's not a great deal of desire in Japan to consider problems outside your sphere of influence," he said. "The media encourages such passivity because those who are the cause of many of the problems are well integrated with the Japanese media."

"In addition, Japanese people feel as if they can't solve all of the problems they have now. It would be a lot to ask them to think about a whole new set of problems that they can't do anything about."

"The NGOs need to first address fundamental issues in Japan, such as a lack of local autonomy, no jury system and the lack of easy access to the legal system. Once this happens, they would then ask themselves what are the most important issues effecting them as political reformist forces, not just as single-issue entities."