

Ken Wilkening

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Guides & Mentors

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Tell us about your job? What inspired you to pursue this career?

I am a policy analyst. A policy analyst is a person who "analyzes policy;" who tries to figure out the best course of action for people in government to take in relation to a certain problem or issue. There are many types of policy analysts. My field of specialty is international environmental issues, especially in Asia. Thus, I am an Asian international environmental policy analyst. I try to figure out the best courses of action for people in government, or policy makers, in Asia and in the United States to take in relation to international environmental issues in Asia. This includes issues such as air pollution and marine pollution.

I decided to pursue this career because first of all, I love nature. I love walking in the woods and canoeing on a river, and I want to protect our woods and rivers from pollution. Second, I believe the solution to our environmental problems lies not in technology but in changing how people act and think. One set of people who have a lot of influence on what happens to our environment is people in government. I decided that I will try to influence the way government people think about international environmental issues in Asia. I can do this by being a policy analyst. Third, I lived in Asia for over 10 years. I feel a special bond with Asia. In my job I act as a bridge between people in Asia and the United States on environmental issues.

You've lived in both Tokyo and the San Francisco Bay Area. What is similar, and what is different about the two places?

Tokyo Bay and San Francisco Bay are both big bays, beautiful bays, and polluted bays. When I look at each bay I feel both happy and sad. I feel happy because they are like big lakes surrounded by

green hills or mountains, and I can see creatures like seals and sea gulls. I feel sad because they are dying bays. There are too many people living near them, too many big boats floating on them, too much trash washing up on the shores, and too much pollution being dumped into them. The biggest difference between the two bays is that the sea gulls in Tokyo Bay speak Japanese and the sea gulls in San Francisco Bay speak English. In other words, they do not squawk the same.

You're an American married to a Japanese woman. What have you learned about Japanese culture through the relationship? What have you learned about American culture?

The most important thing I have learned from being married to a Japanese woman is that Japanese people and American people act and think VERY differently, and that Japanese people and American people act and think EXACTLY the same. When my wife gets angry at me the worst thing she can say to me is: "You are so American!" What she often means is that I speak too loud (Japanese people tend to speak very quietly), or that I ask too many questions (Japanese people tend to learn by observing not asking questions), or that I think of myself first (Japanese people tend to think of the group they are associated with first). But after many years my wife and I have discovered that we both laugh and cry, we both speak through our eyes, and we both love the reflection of the setting sun on the ocean.

Living in another culture opens up many opportunities for discovery. Describe a memorable experience of "cultural awakening," a time you learned something new and interesting about Japanese culture.

I lived in Kyoto for five years. There was a very famous temple close to my apartment. I was told I must go see this temple and its beautiful garden. When I first saw the temple, called the Silver Pavilion, it did not look very old. I liked its handsome shape and beautifully crafted woodwork. I was told there were many buildings older in Kyoto. Then I was told the Silver Pavilion was built in 1492, the same year Columbus discovered America. That was the first time I realized just how young American culture is.

From your perspective as an American, what do you think is the essence of Japanese culture?

MIST. Japan is a land of mist. The forms of mist are myriad. And because of this the Japanese people love pastel colors, muted conversation, darkened interiors, understated emotions, and moss.

Tell us the story about the origin of "sushi."

Sushi originated in Tokyo Bay. Sushi is sliced raw fish set on a small ball of vinegared rice. Raw fish spoils easily so the fish that becomes sushi must be caught, transported, sliced and eaten in a short period of time. In the early days before refrigeration sushi could only be prepared near where fish were caught.

Sushi was originally called "Edo-Mae," which means "in front of Edo Bay." Edo was the early name for Tokyo. The name implied that only fish caught right in front of the city in Tokyo Bay could be used for sushi. Sushi became popular after Tokyo became the capital of Japan in 1600.

For you, what does it mean to live on a bay?

My home is where I spend most of my time. I always take care of my home. My home is on a bay. Therefore, I must take care of my bay. I take care of my bay -- San Francisco Bay -- in little ways. I pick up trash that might flow into the bay. I give money to organizations trying to protect the wetlands around the bay. I learn about the ways of the "first peoples," the Ohlone and Miwok peoples, who

lived around the bay long before Europeans came, and in small ways I imitate them. Do you like acorn soup?

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