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For much of the 1980s, Tokyo's waterfront was an obsession. Books were published on the subject by the shelf-full. Conferences were held. The media's attention was never diverted. There was money to be made out on the waterfront, especially for companies with large land holdings there. Waterfront developments were launched with heady abandon, only to be trimmed back later. These were the plans of men—politicians and entrepreneurs alike—whose main concerns were profit and prestige. In the end, the markets dispensed their own sort of justice.

Perhaps it would be excessively cynical to attribute the recrudescence of enthusiasm for Tokyo's rivers to the commercially driven campaign to boost the waterfront. Several citizens' groups with no particular vested interest have worked hard over many years to improve the condition of the city's waterways. The Sumida, for example, has been the object of a very determined environmental publicity campaign that has scored some notable successes. The river has become significantly cleaner; fish returned to its waters some years back.

That the Sumida should receive most of the attention is natural enough. The river had for several centuries been considered the symbol of the city. All that was connected with it—stories and festivals, bridges and ferries—bore a special significance. The Sumida ferries, in particular, had enshrined in their names and in the memories they evoked so much of the lore of the river, and so much of its history.

The Sumida is far from being the city's only waterway. On its east bank an extensive grid of canals was dug in the seventeenth century, while on the west bank in the center of the city, the canals were twisted into an elaborate system of moats, whirling round and in toward the eminence on which the shogun's castle stood. Many of the moats survive, and the circular system can still be easily traced.

On the other side of the Sumida, the Onagi River has always been a working waterway, carrying a

full load of water-bound commerce from the countryside and ports east of the city. So many factories were built along its banks during Tokyo's years of headlong industrialization that barges had trouble mooring once they had snaked their way up the canal. The intensity and pace of industrialization resulted not only in the poisoning of the waters but in the depletion of the water table. This had very serious consequences, with more and more land sinking below sea level. Flooding occurred with growing severity; the 1907 and, worst of all, the 1910 floods inundated the entire east bank.

Excerpted from *Fragments of a City, A Tokyo Anthology* by Paul Waley(The Japan Times, Tokyo, 1992), pp. 219-221.
