

On Sunday March 31, a conference on human rights was held in Osaka. Entitled "The Shape of Happiness in the 21st Century. Rethinking Human Rights and the Role of the Legal Profession," it was divided into eight sessions devoted to various topics. In the session on "Happiness for Pets, Happiness for People," which was moderated by Takeshi Utsumi, Elizabeth Oliver of ARK and Masumi Yoshida of the Pet Hogakukai were the featured speakers. The session was devoted to laws regarding animals, which were discussed from a variety of angles, including the situation of pets in Japan and abroad, animal abuse and rescue operations, and animal rights. Following is a summary of some of the points discussed.

In the West, particularly in England and Germany, people generally get dogs and cats from shelters rather than purchasing them at pet shops. The idea of selling live animals in shops like any other merchandise is frowned upon, so dealers will introduce customers who insist on a certain type to specialized breeders, rather than stock pedigreed animals in a shop. This highlights a large gap in consciousness between Japan and the West. Although Japan is now in the midst of a pet boom, with pet ownership so fashionable it could properly be called a craze, we need to change people's perceptions and attitudes and promote more adoption from shelters. If people simply continue buying animals from pet shops, Japan will never catch up with the West. Animals are bred because there is demand; this creates a supply that must then be sold. This cycle is endlessly repeated. To put an end to this system, we must start where we can. If all of us as individuals talk to all the people we know, attitudes can change little by little. The circle of understanding will grow.

The industry that is responsible for, and profits from, Japan's pet boom (breeding centres, dealers and shops) is largely unaccountable due to the vagueness of the present Animal Protection Law. No matter how unsanitary, abusive or unscrupulous a business is, it is extremely difficult to prosecute under the present regulations. Even if the local authorities carry out an inspection, the most they can do is call for improvements, and there have been very few instances in which follow-up inspections have been conducted regularly to ensure that all the improvements are made. As just one example of the law's vagueness, which was brought up by Mr. Yoshida, the present Animal Protection Law does not define "abuse" in any detail,

making it highly difficult to prosecute offenders. Witnesses who report abuse have subjective standards of cruelty, but the law offers no clear guidelines to determine what constitutes abuse. In order to prosecute those who mistreat animals, we should not simply rely on circumstantial evidence, but submit reliable, "hard" proof and move forward cautiously. In the absence of an inspector system like that which exists in the West, letting ourselves be ruled by emotion and acting accordingly may actually expose animals to more danger, not less.

In this regard, Mr. Yoshida argued that what Japan needs now is a system of authorized "animal welfare promoters" in every municipality, who would serve as advisors to people with questions regarding animals. The presence of such advisors would promote animal welfare activities at the local level, he suggested. However, I have heard that while these "animal welfare promoters" are approved by the authorities, they have no official powers. In the Kinki area, Hyogo prefecture has been the first to introduce this system, and I look forward to seeing what kind of effect it will have.

Besides the above, the discussion ranged so far and wide that I don't have space here for much more, but with regard to the question of whether the present Animal Protection Law will lead to a decrease in the number of animal exterminations and abuse or not, I believe the unaccountability of the pet industry must be rectified by changing the present system. Currently, someone who wants to start a business dealing in animals is required only to notify the authorities. This must be changed to a licensing system, with proper regulation, including penalties such as stiff fines and the revoking of licenses for businesses that fail to meet standards. And more than anything, we need to ensure that pet owners are made aware of their responsibilities to keep animals for life and to prevent the birth of unwanted puppies and kittens. A stricter registration system (using microchips, for example) could help prevent animals from being thrown away like so much garbage, and the practice of neutering needs to become more widespread. If pet owners' attitudes change, we might be able to prevent more cases of the "collect till you go bust" phenomenon we've been seeing in recent years, where people are overrun by the stray animals they pick up and keep without neutering. The only way to change the present situation in Japan is to change people's minds.

I recently took part in a symposium which started off with a video produced by ALIVE. The video showed the cruel spectacle of animals being gassed to death at the pound, and it was so unforgivingly graphic that I wanted to turn away. Telling myself that I shouldn't look away from reality, however, I desperately forced myself to watch it through to the end. It was so shocking that I found myself crying, but this was the reality that I had been too afraid to face until now. I never wanted to believe that animals met with such a horrible end. I realized how stupid I was to believe in the words "put to sleep."

In addition to this video, the meeting as a whole revealed the terrible suffering of so many animals in Japan. I became very angry at the inadequate response of the authorities, who feign ignorance of the situation, and at the same time felt strongly that we need to find ways to help animals through our own efforts, without relying on the government.

This is something the panelists all said too, but I believe we have to build a wider network of like-minded people. With the current "pet boom" in Japan, the number of people who care about animal welfare is said to be rising. But because this is still at the individual level, it has yet to be transformed into a movement for change. The meager powers of individual people can become something much stronger when brought together. To make that happen, we need to use the Internet and the media to raise people's awareness and compassion, and to call on them to become more involved in helping animals. If enough people become involved, if this becomes a national movement, wouldn't that eventually force the government to do something? At the very least, every person in Japan should be made to know what is being done to animals by their fellow human beings. If human beings are creatures with a conscience, this alone should be enough as a first step toward change.