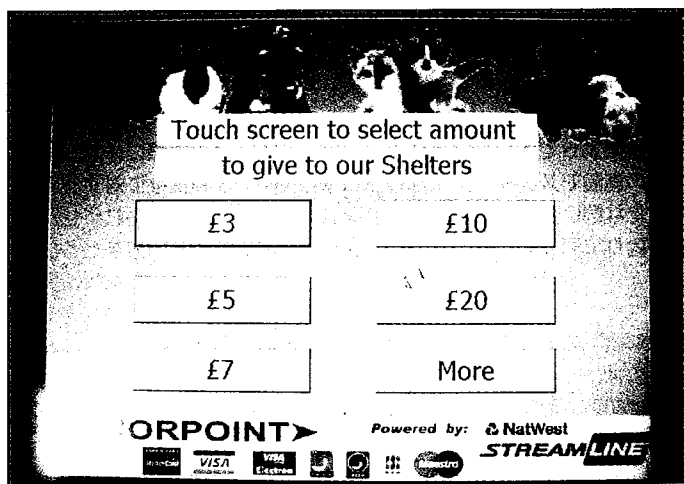




I recently participated with the ARK staff in a tour of animal shelters around England led by Elizabeth Oliver. On the trip we attended "Crufts 2005," the largest dog show in Europe, and visited five shelters. Every day seeing the situation of animals in England brought astonishment. The show and shelters gave us good insight into British animal welfare, one of the most progressive countries in this regard. The trip was an eye opener and a very valuable experience.

First, we visited Birmingham, where champion dogs from countries all over the world competed in the Crufts Dog Show, a big event lasting four days. People gathered with their beloved dogs to compete for best of breed. The general public also attended the show. My first impression of Crufts was the immense size of the venue. A pedigree show was held for each breed; there was a dance show for handlers and dogs, sporting events such as agility and flyball, and working dog demonstrations. All together there were five venue sites including arenas, shops for the sale of dog-related goods, and charity booths for shelters. With so much going on at this human-dog event, the time flew by.

The first thing that caught my eye at the entrance were several electric wheelchairs lined up waiting to be used. In public spaces, facilities were available for people with disabilities and the physically unimpaired to share the same eye level and the social environment was such that people accepted this quite naturally. For example, the free maps handed out at travel destinations always had markings to indicate restrooms and other facilities designed for people with disabilities. Alongside staircases were elevators or slopes, while the doorways were wide and one would often see the physically "able-bodied" wait for people with disabilities to go through doors first, then follow after. In England I felt that both the physical infrastructure and the social awareness were in place not only to protect animals, but to help many in positions of weakness in British society.

Those participating in the dog show events included families in top pedigree competition (who seemed very wealthy), harmonious-looking elderly couples, and young families with babies. The range was very wide. This was an environment in which people could learn to have contact with dogs in a variety of ways. Moreover, it seemed that people's behaviour was not human-centered but based on a high esteem for dogs. This made me feel that people involved with dogs have a high degree of moral awareness.

Pedigree competitions naturally mean that unneutered and unsplayed purebred dogs are all gathered in one location, yet the venue was almost entirely free of smell (from dog markings, etc.) and I witnessed no fighting among the dogs, either. It didn't even seem as though it took any effort on the part of the owners or dogs themselves. It then dawned on me that this is the true meaning of successful dog training. (The show days for males and bitches were different, but this was explained to me as intended to help the competing dogs to concentrate.) Nonetheless, with so many different kinds of visitors to the show you would expect trouble of some sort. Yet I never once saw any scene that even hinted of trouble. Also at each hall there were booths at which dogs and their owners could rest. These were separated by a single partition, and dogs of the same breed left there by their owners -- did the owners just go off shopping? --rested quietly together with no leads, all waiting devotedly for the return of their masters. That

situation demonstrated the deep bond between each master and dog.

This big event attracted people from all over England as well as many other countries, and fun games held on the last day had people laughing all the time. In the evening a long line of people and dogs led to the parking lot. These were folks getting onto a bus with their dog as naturally as if they were getting into a taxi. Seeing this made me feel what a wonderful world it is when there is true coexistence between people and dogs.

After the Crufts show we visited five shelters: the Dogs Trust in Honiley, The Blue Cross in the Cotswolds, Wood Green Animal Shelter in Cambridge, the Battersea Dogs Home in London and the National Cat Centre in the London suburb of Haywards Heath. Each facility had its own unique features. One accepted wild animals (horses, sheep, small animals) as others would pets. Another was for cats only. But what they all had in common was a land site with plenty of space, good transportation access, and the ability to find new owners for the animals under their care in just under two months. Such a standard of animal control would be unimaginable in Japan. There seemed to be a very good balance between three important elements making this all possible -- the law (support from the government and legal system), people (the cooperation of the public and volunteer support), and funding (financial support from individuals and corporations). Also, everywhere we went I was reminded that you need to have really large numbers of people thinking seriously about how to live happily in harmony with nature and animals.

Yet, the large number of shelters and facilities and the quantity of animals that they take in indicates that the number of owners who give up their animals is by no means low, either. (There are 15 Dogs Trust centres throughout England!) No matter what shelter you ask, the most common reasons that people give up their pets are: divorce; no longer wanting the pet; and because a child was born. In this respect there is little difference between countries, but certain behaviour on the part of both owners and shelters show the very high level of awareness in England. These include: (1) Owners who want to let go of their pets do not simply abandon them (a pet microchip identification system will quickly reveal who the owner is if the pet is found abandoned). Most take them to a shelter and the shelter expresses gratitude to the owner (for giving the animals a chance to go from an unhappy situation to a new home and lead a happy life); (2) In many cases where owners want to let go of their pet, the pet has some kind of problem, but the shelters have programmes designed to retrain animals to eliminate problem behaviours; also by providing thorough counselling for people wishing to adopt for the first time the shelters play an important role in finding a pet that is right for that new owner; (3) Even when a potential owner wishes to adopt a pet, if that person does not have the ability to accommodate the pet, the shelters will help the potential owner to improve the environment or gain the knowledge of proper etiquette needed to have a pet.

We also talked to the staff at the shelters. One person told me, "None of us has any special qualifications. We started out just as volunteers. We learned everything from others who had a lot of experience to get this far. Now we work as employees of this facility and are proud to be able to help find animals new homes."

So, you have people with great experience, knowledge, and the ability to take action who do the things that have built England's reputation as "a citadel of the humane spirit." But you also have a system that guarantees at least a minimum level of support not only for people but to allow people to coexist with gratitude to all living things. When you put together the system with people who use it and people who help support it, that is when you first begin to exemplify the humane spirit.

After seeing how animals are treated in England with my own eyes, I regret to admit that there remains a significant gap between attitudes toward animal welfare in Japan and in the UK. But I believe that the people who understand this through experience and are looking to put that experience to use in Japanese society will form the crux of a movement that will change our society in the future. How can we put this valuable experience to use? That is the question raised by my contact with animal welfare in England.