

Pet Peeves -dogs and cats in Tokyo are cute pampered-- and frequently neglected Colleen Sheils

"I bet you got this dog after seeing that Nissan commercial." The smiling man looked at me in all earnestness while petting my then five-month old puppy, Roxy. I hadn't seen the TV ad but was used to being stopped by other Weimaraner admirers with cries of "the Nissan dog!" This latest comment felt a bit extreme though. I can understand rushing out to buy a new kind of canned coffee after seeing a silly commercial, but a dog expected to grow to 30kg?

A laughable scenario, if the exact one hadn't already unfolded for a smaller breed after the loan company AIFUL ran a series of commercials about a surly father's relationship with a long-haired Chihuahua. The funny little Mexican breed is now the second most popular in Japan after the miniature Dachshund. While one might think toy breeds can't get any smaller, their potential price tags have led breeders to produce even tinier versions, the double S-size of Japan's canines.

Unregulated back alleys and yakuza ties dominate one side of dog breeding here, a part of the \$10 billion pet industry. The New York Times reported last December that rampant inbreeding has resulted in Japan's dogs having up to four times as many genetic defects as those in the US. Some dogs are bred to be so small that to birth one healthy puppy, a litter of grossly deformed siblings is also born, and then destroyed or sold off for laboratory experiments. Other times, seemingly healthy dogs suddenly develop strange and fatal genetic disorders later in life.

The problem may not be limited to toy breeds. Before getting Roxy, I researched extensively on Weimaraners. I did have some misgivings about getting an active, big dog in such a cramped city, but considering my lifestyle, my proximity to parks, and my home office, I knew I'd be able to give her the right amount of exercise and care. However,

finding a somewhat rare breed without dealing with shady pet shops or extortionist breeders led me to do something that I shouldn't have: I found my dog on the Internet.

A naïve decision in retrospect, at the time I knew little about the many bad breeding practices here. When meeting the puppies and the woman raising them, I arrived armed with two lists, one noting warning signs of puppy mills, the other health-related questions verifying all was on the up and up. I think the latter might have insulted her, but I knew I had to ask those, and did. And luckily, Roxy came from caring hands. Still, I now realize that by finding her on the Internet, I was in some way supporting unscrupulous pet sellers using those same channels.

Roxy's pedigree, the canine version of a family tree, consists almost entirely of dogs bred in Japan. Now over a year old, Roxy, at 23kg, is on the small side for a Weimaraner. Her height is below breed standard, nearly to the point of automatic disqualification if she ever competed. She won't of course, and I have no issues with a less-than-perfect pedigree, but these deviations might indicate a darker side of breeding big dogs here, like efforts to quickly size them more agreeably to Japanese life.

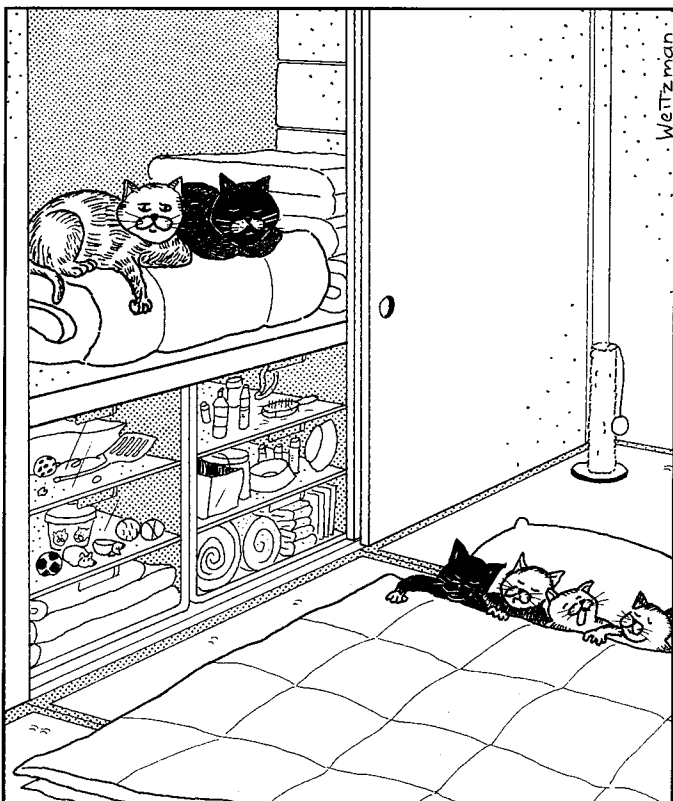
The pet life here is definitely on the rise. As a dog owner, I can see the positives: greater awareness and interest in animal caretaking, an increase in pet-friendly restaurants and rental housing as well as better, more reliable kennels. I meet responsible and loving pet owners daily, people who treat their pets as companions and family members.

Yet as the number of pets increases, so does the amount of abandoned dogs and cats, with nothing but bad news waiting for them. Nearly a million are gassed or made part of laboratory experiments annually. Animal Rescue Kansai, an animal welfare non-profit, has worked for years saving and re-homing abandoned animals. If you are looking for a new pet, ARK, or one of the few similar organizations, should be your first stop.

In 2003 a survey revealed that almost 30% of pet owners here don't enjoy caring for their pets. That adds up to millions of unloved animals. Certainly, having a dog can at times be inconvenient. They require a commitment of emotion, money, and time. Having a child can also at times be inconvenient. Needless to say, the upside of any kind of parenting is far greater than the down. Dogs may have gone from living in concrete backyards to the insides of Louis Vuitton bags here, but both extremes tie back to the same mistaken belief that pets are objects, meant for the whim, fancy, and convenience of humans.

The lack of strictly enforced laws preventing inhumane treatment of animals is one reason for this. With Japan's human population declining, dogs now outnumber children under the age of 12, and the pet boom may not be subsiding anytime soon. In October, Tokyo will host the 11th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions on "People and Animals: Partnership in Harmony." Hopefully, change is on the horizon.

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