

Give the children Tamagotchi instead

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woman who bought an Akita and she said she didn't know it would grow to be so big," she said.

Oliver also said that the periodic booms in popularity of certain dog breeds means that public health centers tend to have inordinate numbers of certain types of dogs a few years after the boom dies down.

For example, a short-term boom in huskies a few years ago has now led to many of these dogs being found recently in pounds after being sent from public health centers. She added that with the recent decline in popularity of golden retrievers among Japanese dog owners there may be a rise of those dogs ending up in pounds from next year.

She said the past popularity of huskies in Japan was a good example of the lack of knowledge about dogs in Japan.

"Huskies are totally unsuited for an ordinary Japanese house. They're too big, they're difficult to train, they're not suited to the climate and they are not suited to being a family dog," she said.

Pet shop cowboys

Lack of controls over pet shops also leads to problems, Oliver said. Because there is no licensing system, pet shops are not required to meet any standards for hygiene and handling of animals. Even when problems are discovered with pets they have sold, the owners of the pet shops are often unable to offer any help because they lack a solid background in pet care, Oliver pointed out.

Oliver referred to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals in Britain, which was established in 1824, as a model for Japan. She said the RSPCA's inspectors have powers that are equivalent to the police and can go after individuals who treat animals cruelly and also check into conditions at pet shops.

While animal abuse is not a problem confined to Japan, Oliver said she felt the issue in Japan was more a lack of education on pet care.

Need for education

"Our main objective is really education—just trying to raise the level of caring for the needs of animals," she said.

ARK has about 4,000 members and supporters, who receive a quarterly newsletter. Since most are generally aware of the problems pets and animals face in Japan, its educational effect is negligible.

On her frequent visits to schools in the Kansai region, Oliver has found that children are often unsure of how to approach the dogs she brings with her. However, since the children become more comfortable around the animals after an hour or so, she concludes that greater efforts to educate the children would go a long way in improving the treatment of animals.

In her native Britain, Oliver said there are many animal welfare societies that undertake education programs to help British children learn from an early age how to treat and touch an animal.

Ignorance, rather than intentional cruelty, was also the main cause of the mistreatment of animals confined in Japanese zoos that was criticized last year by a visiting British researcher, Oliver said. Thinking of the situation from the viewpoint of the animal would lead to imaginative methods to improve the environment without necessarily spending a lot of money to reconstruct the zoos, she believes.

It is this type of thinking that has led Oliver to decide against chaining animals at ARK to posts.

Lack of knowledge is often cited as another reason for the low level of acceptance among the general public for the gelding, vasectomy or spaying of pets to prevent unwanted births.

Oliver added that Japanese perceptions about what is considered natural also impedes

understanding about the need for such sterilization.

"People are against anything that interferes with nature," she said.

JAVA's Hagiwara said disseminating more information on sterilization would go a long way toward reducing the number of dogs and cats put to death at public health centers.

The 1996 JAVA study found that between 70 and 80 percent of animals killed in 1995 were newly-born puppies and kittens. Hagiwara said this meant that many pet owners were likely abandoning the animals because they felt they would be unable to properly care for them.

Oliver said the recent popularity of the virtual pet Tamagotchi was indicative of

the fact that many children have very little direct contact with animals.

In the current state of animal welfare in Japan, she added that it was probably better to give children mechanical toys rather than buy them real pets. "I'm in favor of anything that doesn't use a live animal," Oliver said.

Hagiwara of JAVA said that improving the condition of animals in Japan would in turn help to raise the level of human lives as well.

"Nations that have low levels of welfare for animals also have low levels of welfare programs for humans," Hagiwara pointed out. Preventing cruelty to animals would also lead to a decrease in cruel and horrible crimes against humans, she added.



ROY K. AKAGAWA
Elizabeth Oliver takes a break during a walk with a dog.