

Kansai cat mafia terrorizing pet owners, animal lovers

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Domestic cats are being hunted by groups of professionals on the back streets of Kobe. Hearing the disturbing rumor, **Shukan Asahi** visits the city to find out exactly what's going on. The magazine shocks animal lovers with its discovery: Professional trappers are selling captured felines to university laboratories where cruel animal experiments await them.

According to **Shukan Asahi**, generous residents of Kobe's Higashinada-ku who had been feeding cats left homeless in the Great Hanshin Earthquake noticed something was amiss earlier this year when the cats began disappearing one after another. "We were on the lookout because we heard the rumor that someone poached cats in Kobe two or three years ago," one of the residents informs the magazine. "Then, in June, we found three suspicious boxes. We lifted the lid and found cats inside."

Shukan Asahi reports that similar box-shaped cat traps have been discovered in Kobe's Nishi-ku, Itami and Osaka. The differing shapes of the boxes suggest more than one group of cat hunters are in operation. There are reports from Nara Prefecture that poachers have been found capturing cats using a specially devised wired contraption.

関西で猛威ふるう恐怖のネコ狩りマフィア

Other cat hunters are using a more shrewd method. A pet-shop owner in Kobe tells **Shukan Asahi** that a young woman visited her shop in October, saying that she wanted to take care of homeless kittens. This woman said she was a "co-ed," gave a false phone number and left the shop with a number of kitties. According to the magazine, this cat hunter in disguise has used the same modus operandi to cajole animal hospitals and pet owners in Kobe and the neighboring city of Akashi out of several dozen kittens.

Most Japanese automatically think of *shamisen*, a traditional stringed instrument, the body of which is covered with cat skin, when they hear of cat poaching. However, shamisen manufacturers apparently have no part in these cat thefts. **Shukan Asahi** quotes a spokesman of a trade organization who reveals that 60 percent to 70 percent of the instrument is now made with dog skin. The source adds that cat skin is used to make shamisen of the highest standard, but the material is now imported from such countries as China and the Philippines. Another insider, a shamisen-maker in Osaka, guarantees: "To my knowledge, no shamisen-maker in Osaka uses Japanese cat skin."

Shukan Asahi finds sufficient reasons to believe that the majority of poached cats are sold to research centers which conduct animal experiments. The centers secretly purchase poached cats to save money. "Sterilized cats imported from other countries cost 100,000 yen to 200,000 yen per head," an animal dealer in Tokyo explains. "University-affiliated and other low-budget laboratories cannot afford them. They use Japanese cats for most experiments. These cats are sold for 20,000 yen to 30,000 yen per head." The dealer adds most underground cat suppliers opt for trapping stray cats because cat-breeding is difficult and not profitable.

The magazine silences doubters with a flier it obtained from a cat lover in Osaka. It reads: "Attention! Those of You Troubled by Homeless Cats! Our Company, XXX Trading, Can Help You. We Have Been Hunting Stray Cats for 30 Years. Call Us Now." (TI)