

PERSONAL VIEW

Discarded dogs and cats
gassed to death in Japan

By TIM GROVES

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To our more squeamish readers, I should like to apologize for drawing your attention to a rather unpleasant subject—the disposal of unwanted pets by local authorities.

We don't much talk or even think about it, but at the back of our minds we know it is a nasty business.

One fact that has escaped most of us is that on an average day in Japan, around 2,000 cats and dogs are placed into gas chambers and killed by carbon dioxide asphyxiation.

Their bodies are then unceremoniously placed in adjacent furnaces and cremated.

This macabre scene, reminiscent of a Nazi concentration camp, is enacted every single day at local government-run centers known as *hokenjo* as the authorities' preferred solution to the problem of stray and abandoned pets.

It is shocking to realize that somewhere a group of people actually sat down and planned this system, found that it worked, and then institutionalized it throughout the country.

While gassing is an efficient method of disposing of more than three-quarters of a million unwanted animals a year, it is far from humane, does nothing to tackle the roots of the throwaway-pets problem, and is certainly not the only available option.

The cruelty of the process is not in question.

Animals captured as strays, or handed over by owners who no longer wish to keep them, are kept collectively in cramped conditions, sometimes without food or water and with dogs of all sizes, or adult cats and kittens, crowded together in respective dog and cat rooms until enough have been gathered to fill the

gas chamber.

For the first arrivals, this can entail a wait of several days. Some local authorities even store groups of live puppies or kittens in sacks to await gassing.

Asphyxiation in a carbon dioxide atmosphere is not considered particularly painful, but it is unpleasant and death takes several minutes.

Animals burned alive?

The animals are gassed for up to 40 minutes to ensure death prior to incineration. However, kittens and puppies can survive longer periods of oxygen deprivation than adult dogs and cats. With 40 or 50 animals processed at a time, it is impractical to check on each one, so there are undoubtedly instances of live animals being incinerated.

The situation is soul-destroying for those who must carry it out, some of whom have spoken publicly of their anguish. It is also drawing the attention of foreign media, an example being a recent article in the British newspaper, *The Times*, entitled "Stray pets are burnt to death in Japan."

When friends in Britain inevitably begin asking me how such a disgrace can occur in supposedly civilized Japan, I'll tell them that in my opinion the problem stems not from any particular desire to be cruel to animals, but from an attitude of callous indifference by the authorities, and lack of concern and activism among the millions of Japanese who are fond of animals and don't wish them to suffer.

There are an awful lot of stray and abandoned animals, some of them dangerous, which authorities have a duty to control. But people should question why the problem isn't tackled at its root—the irresponsible actions of owners who throw away pets or

allow them to breed and then dump the litters of puppies and kittens they produce.

In Japan, there are no effective laws to protect animals from cruelty or abandonment, and no enforced licensing system for dogs or cats. Effective legislation is unlikely to be enacted unless the concerned public both in Japan and abroad loudly raises its voice.

I don't think Japanese people in general are any less fond of animals than people of other nationalities.

From the numbers of animals abandoned it appears that only a tiny percentage of the population is involved in the shameful business.

The main differences between Japan and, for example, Britain, is that the latter has anti-cruelty laws and strong social pressure to protect animals which act to keep the majority of potential offenders in line. Spaying and neutering are encouraged to prevent unwanted reproduction and attempts are made to educate pet owners to take proper care of their animals.

Ignoring the problem

By contrast, in Japan, one week a year is designated as Be Kind to Animals Week, and the rest of the time everyone from the government down to ordinary citizens seems determined to ignore the problem.

Laws aren't made, offenders aren't shamed, and animals go on being needlessly victimized.

The modest legal, social and administrative changes needed to improve this situation are long overdue.

Until they are made, foreign characterizations of the Japanese as barbaric and cruel will be difficult to rebut.

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