

Kansai Focus

Awareness of pets' rights, protection on the rise

Mainichi Shimbun

Residents and local governments in western Japan, up to now, have shown far less concern on issues concerning animals than their counterparts in eastern Japan. But as the popularity of owning pets in the Kansai region continues to rise, so is awareness and the concrete steps that are being taken toward remedying the many problems.

Hyogo Prefecture became the first Kansai prefecture to introduce an "animal protection clause" in a municipal ordinance when, on April 1, it adopted an ordinance concerning the protection and management of animals based on a similar statute passed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

The Hyogo ordinance calls for heightened awareness among prefectural residents of the need for kindness to animals and makes it mandatory to register all animals used for experimental purposes. It also calls on pet dealers to designate a person directly responsible for overseeing the animals and to adhere strictly to guidelines for employee training.

The ordinance also requires owners to provide adequate food and water for their pets, keep the animals' living quarters clean and sanitary, and provide pets with sufficient exercise.

Out of the doghouse?

Other prefectures throughout the Kansai region may soon follow Hyogo's lead. Nara is considering the pros and cons of giving officials the right to inspect sites where animal abuse is suspected. Osaka has already begun drawing up guidelines that will call for the establishment of an animal protection center.

And Hyogo Prefecture proudly ranks itself as being one of 15 local bodies that have issued official guidelines on the treatment of pets — a number that is soon expected to grow after completion of a similar draft by the Prime Minister's Office that municipalities will be able to use as a model to draw up their own versions.

Despite its progressive moves, though, Hyogo Prefecture is also the site of a fierce "run-in" between authorities and pet-loving residents of a public housing complex.

In April 1992, the prefectural government notified 25 households in a 40-family complex it manages outside Himeji that they had to either part with their pets or face expulsion. Another notice issued in November raised the total number of affected households to 43. An appeal by a residents' association has stalled the eviction orders, but the prefecture still insists on making the complex pet-free.



Deserted alleyways are increasingly becoming home in the Kansai area to abandoned animals like these stray cats, who manage to stay out of reach of traps as well as permanent owners. (Photo: Mainichi Shimbun)

The pet owners are doing everything they can to keep both their pets and their apartments. They conducted a complex-wide survey in January to determine how the other residents felt on the issue, and have subsequently drawn up a compromise plan under which they agree not to feed the pets on their verandas and not to keep the litter boxes there.

Some cats have had their whiskers pulled off by pranksters and others have been cruelly burned.

The prefecture has refused to budge, however, and so far 10 households have given up their pets and one other has moved out.

Cat wars and dog-lovers

Koroen Beach, located in the Hyogo prefectural city of Nishinomiya, has become notorious as a "disposal site" for unwanted felines. Cat owners began abandoning their pets there about 15 years ago, and today at least 50 cats make the seaside area their permanent home. The cat population there swelled even more after the area was recently featured on television and in newspapers as a "cat heaven."

In truth, the area is closer to hell for cats. Some have had their whiskers pulled off by pranksters, and others have been cruelly burned by having firecrackers tied to their backs or had their backs cut open with a knife.

But perhaps even more frighten-

ing than that has been what local residents have dubbed the mysterious "cat-napper." The man was first spotted in the area around August 1991, coming everyday to feed the cats sausages and other food like any other cat owner. But once the cats lowered their guard, it was found, he would snatch them up and carry them away in a cardboard box.

Although the man has not been spotted this year, local rumor has it that he either used the cats for experiments or had them skinned so their hide could be used for the body of the three-stringed shamisen musical instrument. The truth about the cat's fates may never be known.

One woman in Toyonaka, northern Osaka Prefecture, who could not stand seeing unwanted animals being heartlessly discarded and killed, has formed a group that aims to enlighten owners on the need for proper training of their dogs.

One Michiyo came to the realization that pets must be taught to behave before their status in society can be elevated to that of true "partners" of human beings. It was for this reason that she formed "Pure," a women-only network of dog-lovers that recently held a meeting in Sakai, southern Osaka, to call attention to the need for such training — and to expand the circle of like-minded pet owners at the same time.

Group members of Pure believe it is possible for dogs to gain "citizenship" just like in Western countries if owners would just take the trouble to train them and make sure their pets are well-behaved.

However, considering the overall condition that the ever-popular domesticated animals in Kansai are finding themselves these days, many animal rights advocates pose the practical question: Who needs such behavior training more, the pets or the pet owners?