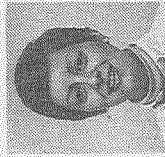


Traveling zookeeper delights Kansai kids with pettable pals



A Bit of Kansai

STEPHANIE L. COOK

Hiroshi Hagiwara hates lions. He loathes tigers. He despises crocodiles, and has hated zoos since he was a child. "I always felt that if I couldn't touch the animals and couldn't even see them close up, stuck behind bars as they were, I'd just as soon sit at home looking at animals in a picture book." Hagiwara's philosophy makes him the perfect candidate to do exactly what he does: run one of Kansai's few traveling zoos.

Zoos on wheels apparently date back about two decades in Kansai, but the past few years have seen a growth in both number and variety. Though still a Kansai phenomenon, a few traveling zoos have sprung up in Tokyo, Nagoya, Hiroshima, and Kyushu. Some involve conventional zoos dispatching mini-animal delegations. Others, like Hagiwara's, are mobile petting zoos. And one Shiga-based business specializes in exotic "can't touch" critters like lions and tigers and —

you bet — crocodiles for exhibition only.

Hagiwara's traveling menagerie just sort of evolved on its own from a pony bought with money earned during high school years. He joined a horseback riding club while still in elementary school, and to this day, horses give Hagiwara more pleasure than any other animal. Shalom Pony Zoo features three ponies, four imported miniature horses, and about 18 other types of creatures including a donkey, a silver fox, a turkey, and an amiable python. ("I hear they're increasingly popular with Tokyo show biz people," confides Hagiwara.) When asked what happens when his young calves grow into cows, the zookeeper grins sheepishly and admits to having a friendly farmer trade him a new calf for Hagiwara's mature bovine.

At present, mobile zookeepers head for kindergarten/day care centers and "events." The latter can be



HIROSHI HAGIWARA dislikes tigers, crocodiles and other nasty carnivores that he can't keep in his traveling petting zoo, currently carling this goat and 18 other amiable critters around the Kansai area. PHOTO BY STEPHANIE COOK

anything from festivals staged as part of village revitalization programs to commercial events like department store promotions. In fact, Hagiwara has a mobile aquarium with unusual south American fish which he offers as an event alternative.

Although the events bring in ¥150,000 and up, close to triple what Hagiwara charges for 2-4 hours with preschoolers, he much prefers the latter. Adults, finds the gentle Kyotoite, are much less re-

ceptive to guidance on handling the animals.

For all their innocence, the children do occasionally wreak tragedy. One 3-year-old at an event featuring the Shalom zoo was dismayed because a guinea pig wouldn't quit wriggling in his arms. The child broke its neck and then happily cuddled the furry critter, clearly oblivious to the distinction between doll and animal. Understandably, chicks are not part of the Shalom family.

A typical day sees the animal keeper up at 5 a.m. Forty minutes are spent loading up the creatures slated to travel; another 20 are needed to feed those who stay behind. By 6 a.m. the truck is rolling, since traffic is always unpredictable. Arriving at his destination early, Hagiwara slips off for breakfast. By 9 a.m. he's setting up fences in the courtyard, and from 10-12 the children have a multi-faceted experience with the animals, including a gentle lecture on handling, a chance to feed and play, and rides on the larger animals, often together with a monkey who has a particular affinity for a pony named Cadillac. The few sessions that resume after lunch do so to allow the children sketching time. Hagiwara, still himself a very young man, seems to instinctively understand how to effectively communicate with the children. He leaves most of his animals unnamed, since bestowing nomenclature gives the preschoolers added joy.

For now, Hagiwara is happy with his traveling companions. But his ultimate dream is a wide expanse of land where he can create a complete petting zoo and employ the disabled to care for the animals.