

Fabled, wily 'tanuki' make u

Wild raccoon dogs head for tamer environs

By ASAKO MURAKAMI
Staff writer

Raccoon dogs, better known here as "tanuki," have been closely related to both the culture and daily lives of Japanese from ancient times.

Tanuki often feature in folk tales as well as popular stories for children, usually appearing as slow-witted but nevertheless amiable creatures. They are treated, more often than not, in an affectionate manner.

In folklore, they try to fool humans by changing shape, often transforming themselves into humans. Their absent-mindedness almost always prevents them from outwitting humans, as they often fail to hide their tails in their clothes.

Tanuki, which live in most parts of the country, from Hokkaido to Kyushu, are thus quite familiar to the Japanese. Yet the wild animals have been rarely seen in the suburbs of large cities — until quite recently.

"Tanuki now have an image much like that of stray cats in the city," said Noriko Kuwahara, chairwoman of the Tama Hills Field Museum.

She was speaking at a recent tanuki symposium in Machida, a city in the western suburbs of the metropolis.

Kuwahara, a 47-year-old resident of Machida, became interested in the subject after seeing her first tanuki in 1988 — sadly a dead one left by the side of a road, apparently killed by a car.

She started collecting information on tanuki living near cities two years ago. To her surprise, she received eye-

witness accounts of the animals and various other related information not only from Machida residents but also from people in other areas, including Hachioji, also in western Tokyo, and Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture.

Food supply dwindling

"It's not because the number of tanuki is suddenly increasing but because they simply cannot find food in the woods anymore," Kuwahara said of the animals' growing urban presence.

Staff at her museum have found that there is a causal relationship between the rapid housing development in the Tama hills and the sharp increase in tanuki killed by automobiles.

According to the municipal government's public cleaning division, the number of tanuki killed on roads in 1990 increased to 62, from 20 in 1986.

The group also collected information on damage the species inflicts on crops and poultry.

Viewed as rural pest

Shizuo Susaki of Machida told the symposium that most of his Indian corn had recently been eaten by tanuki.

"I tried many tricks to protect my corn field, such as digging a pit to trap them and covering the plants with a net, but they all failed," Susaki said in near despair.

Poultry farmer Kame Saito said the first tanuki attack on her chicks was five years ago. "About 20 to 30 chicks were killed by the animal," she said. "So, I caught it by setting a trap two years ago, and have been keeping it (as a precaution) ever since."

About 230 people attended the gathering to discuss how to live in harmony with tanuki.

"Tanuki have great physical and social adaptability," said Hiroshi Ikeda of the Cultural Properties Protection Department of the governmental Cultural Affairs Agency.

Ikeda, who has been conducting an ecological study of tanuki for the last 15 years, said the animals can survive if there are some woods for them to live in and something for them to eat.

They are true omnivores, eating anything from berries to birds, he explained. His study found that during winter the animals forage for scraps in residential areas.

Captivity ruled out

At the symposium, several participants who happened to bring up tanuki said they feel the animals should not be raised in captivity.

It would be better for both humans and tanuki not to live too near each other, observed Ikuo Kanai, who has studied wild animals in Tokyo for the past 30 years.

But the rapid pace of urban development has made it difficult to ensure the situation remains unchanged, he said. "If you bring up the animal from birth, you are responsible for feeding it. An animal that is raised by humans cannot go back to the woods and stay alive."

Kuwahara said, "We must recognize that tanuki as well as other wild animals do live in places around us . . . We should make our city comfortable for both people and such wild animals to live in."



TWO 'TANUKI,' or raccoon dogs, Kirishima-Yaku National Park in M

Hunters to mal

By RIEKO TANAKA
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If you visit Shimane Prefecture this winter, you may find some elderly people wearing new vest warmers made of "tanuki" fur.

The Shimane Hunters' Association has come up with the idea of presenting 50 traditional Japanese vests as gifts to the elderly this winter in an effort to make best use of furs from raccoon dogs that are being killed off to keep their local populations at proper levels and thus protect farms and wildlife from the omnivorous animal.

"Until now, we hunters used to simply throw away the bodies of the raccoon dogs we had to kill," a spokesman for the prefectural association of hunters explained. "We hope our gifts will make elderly people happy."

In recent years, the local