

make urban inroads



TWO 'TANUKI,' or raccoon dogs, eat fruit left out for them in the yard of a traditional inn in Kirishima-Yaku National Park in Miyazaki Prefecture. HIROSHI IKEDA PHOTO

Hunters to make fur vests for the elderly

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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

population of raccoon dogs has increased rapidly. One of the primary reasons is that this particular animal is not attractive game for hunters since its fur fetches a relatively cheap price.

"Raccoon dogs in Shimane Prefecture have the most beautiful fur in Japan. Despite this fact, their fur is priced at only ¥1,000 per piece. Few people would dare hunt down such a cheap animal nowadays," the spokesman said.

As the number of the raccoon dogs increases, so does the number of problems arising from the animal's activities. The animal eats not only crops but also such protected birds as pheasants and turtle-doves, according to the local hunters' association.

"Some animal lovers may well condemn us for killing raccoon dogs. However, can

you imagine what will happen if we do nothing to cut the number of raccoon dogs? Wild birds would sooner or later disappear because of the (overpopulated) raccoon dogs. We are sure the ecosystem in Shimane Prefecture would be devastated in the near future," the spokesman said.

Raccoon dogs have notoriously strong reproductive powers and propagate rapidly if not effectively checked by humans or by their natural enemy, according to zoologists.

The hunters' association, which hunts some 2,000 raccoon dogs every year, plans to skin 300 of the animals on a trial basis to make vests for the elderly. For the project, the association will receive ¥1 million in a subsidy from the Japan Hunters' Association, its parent body.