

Group battles for abandoned animals

By ALEXANDER
MACKAY-SMITH IV
Staff writer

In 1990 Tokyo's animal control authorities killed 32,724 cats and dogs.

These figures are more than just a tragedy, says animal welfare activist Dr. Renate Herold. They are a shame — the shame of pet owners who will not take responsibility for their animals.

Herold has horror stories galore. Her organization, Dobutsutachi no Kai, which operates out of a coffee shop in suburban Hino City, has become a clearing house and organizing center for efforts to reduce Japan's abandoned and feral cat and dog population without resorting to mass slaughter. She feels that her group's efforts are having some effect; the 1990 figures, horrifying as they are, are still better than the 54,061 animals put down in 1986.

Herold feels that the entire focus of the government's efforts, as well as those of some private organizations in the field, is off base. In contrast to the 32,724 animals put down by the authorities, only 738 were found homes. No effort at all, Herold says, is made to educate pet owners as to their responsibilities or discourage breeding more unwanted animals.

Herold focuses her efforts particularly on promoting neutering, to stem the flood of new kittens and puppies. The idea seems never to occur to the majority of pet owners; if their pet has kittens or puppies they simply abandon them, or hand them over to the animal control authorities. Some pet owners dispose of two or three litters a year this way.

In point of fact, Paragraph 9 of the Animal Protection and Administration Law states that owners must avoid purposeless breeding. The law is virtually unenforced and the government makes little effort even to encourage voluntary compliance.

One of the problems, on which Herold is vocal, is the high price veterinarians charge for neutering: fees as



LOVING HOMES wanted for these and other cats and dogs rescued by Dr. Renate Herold and the Dobutsutachi no Kai.

high as ¥100,000 for a simple spaying are not unheard of, she says. Even the more usual rates of ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 are enough to give many people pause.

Partly in response to lobbying by Herold's and other animal welfare groups, all but two of Tokyo's urban wards now offer small subsidies to support the operations. Unfortunately, many vets responded by raising their fees an amount equivalent to the subsidy.

Herold has succeeded in putting together a small circle of public-spirited vets willing to perform the operations for ¥10,000 (females) or ¥5,000 (males). Pet owners who contact the Dobutsutachi no Kai will be put in touch with them, or, in some cases, volunteers will actually pick up the animal, take it to the vet, and bring it home again after the operation.

Most of these vets refuse to publicize their names or involvement with Dobutsutachi no Kai, fearing negative reactions from their professional colleagues. Herold has harsh words for the Japanese veterinary establishment; she says that her group and its cooperating vets have actually been the targets of harassment by some veterinarians who object to what they see as price-cutting interference in their lucrative trade.

The group is particularly concerned with the population of feral cats, a serious problem in some neighborhoods. These animals, born and bred in the streets and alleys, are really wild animals, essentially untameable even if captured as kittens. Kind-hearted souls often make a practice of feeding them, but this is no real solution.

Dobutsutachi no Kai's approach is to organize round-ups in areas with a concentration of feral cats, neuter them and release them again. Left to nature, a female cat may produce two or three litters a year; these spaying programs bring an abrupt halt to the population increase. Freed from the dangers and distractions of birth and kitten-raising, the cats themselves lead easier lives.

Following up on the group's efforts, Bunkyo Ward last year introduced its own stray cat neutering program. Herold hopes other wards will follow suit.

Herold (who teaches German at the Foreign Ministry's Foreign Service Training Institute) and her partner Hitoshi Sugimoto operate the group out of Sugimoto's Hino City coffee shop Nada, entirely on a volunteer basis. As for any such group, fund-raising is a problem. Contributions are welcome, and the group operates a fund-raising ba-

zaar every Saturday in Takanobaba; the site is provided by Discat CD shop between the station and Meiji Dori, right outside the No. 6 Tozai Line subway exit.

Even more than money, though, Dobutsutachi no Kai needs volunteer helpers. Herold identified several areas where help is desperately needed: people with cars, vans or just driver's licenses to help with transportation; people to help with the bazaar; people to make posters, help with clerical work, and the like; people just to walk dogs.

"If I can just get people who are willing to board an animal temporarily, while we find it a permanent home, it would make such a difference," Herold says, "but they are afraid they would get stuck with the animal."

Most of all, of course, homes are needed for the animals. The group gets far more calls from people who want to get rid of pets than who want to keep one. Dobutsutachi no Kai is rare (if not unique) among such groups in providing a guarantee for the animals it places. Each one is inoculated and neutered, and if problems arise the group will do whatever is necessary to resolve them, including take the animal back.

Awareness of the problem does seem to be increasing, Herold thinks. A book she wrote on animal-related problems, "Chiisa na Tomodachi no Tame ni," has achieved considerable success: of an original printing of one million, only a few thousand remain unsold. Some other local animal protection groups have bought it in quantity for distribution in their areas. Published by Dobutsu Shuppan and priced at ¥500, it is available in regular book shops and pet stores, as well as from Dobutsutachi no Kai itself.

Dobutsutachi no Kai can be contacted (phone or fax) at (0425) 83-2908. Coffee Shop Nada, the group's headquarters, is located one block from Hino Station on the JR Chuo Line.

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