

For prefecture's unwanted pets, the Aichi center is their last stop

By CHRISTIAN HUGGETT
Regional correspondent

NAGOYA — First Ito was informed that his company was transferring him from Nagoya to Osaka. Then he learned the apartment his company found for him and his family in Osaka did not accept pets.

So one night after his children fell asleep, Ito (not real name) went out to the backyard, unchained his year-old dog, Sandy, drove him to a remote area in Toyota city and abandoned the animal.

"Dogs are mainly abandoned in March and April during the company transfer season, in the summer months when families abandon puppies born in the spring and at the start of hunting season in November when dogs are abandoned on return from hunting trips," said Masaki Kato, a veterinarian with the Aichi Animal Protection Center.

"The most popular place to abandon dogs in Aichi Prefecture is along Green Road, which runs through a wooded area on the outskirts of Toyota city," Kato said. "During peak times, I would estimate that up to 30 dogs a month are abandoned there."

"People abandon their dog because it has become too large for the home, because the family is moving to an apartment that does not allow pets or just because the dog is not cute anymore," he said.

Two years after Sandy was abandoned, he had grown partly wild. He lived in the woods and ate out of garbage bins at a university cafeteria near Green Road.

The university guards, fearing they may be attacked on their nightly rounds, alerted the Aichi Animal Protection Center, which brought a baited cage to a corner of the campus.

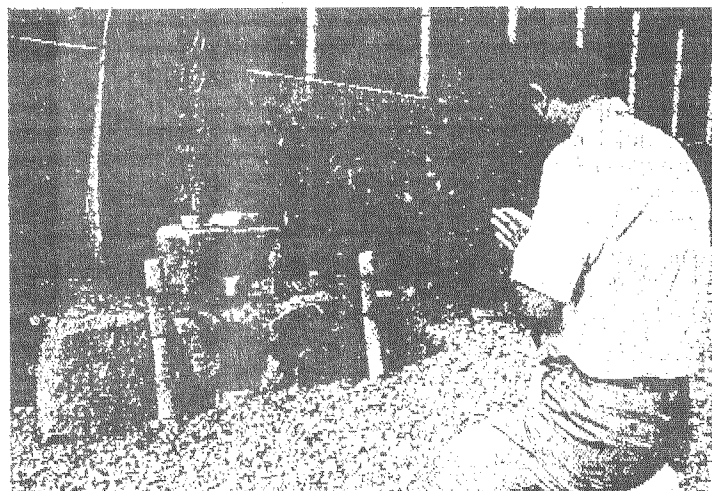
Three days later, Sandy was caught, taken to the center and placed in a cage with 20 other dogs.

After three days, the official waiting period passed and no one came to claim the dog.

At 9:15 the next morning, the 20 dogs were moved to a "sleeping box," which moves



A SEMIWILD DOG, believed abandoned by its owner, sits in a cage after being caught by the Aichi Animal Protection Center before being put to sleep. A center worker offers prayers for the dogs killed at the facility, and every year during the Bon festival, a Buddhist priest holds rites for the animals. CHRISTIAN HUGGETT PHOTOS



slowly on an automated track and stops opposite a control room. A worker then flipped a switch and carbon dioxide entered the sleeping chamber.

Fifteen minutes later Sandy was dead.

"According to our research, carbon dioxide is the most humane way to kill an animal," says center head Katsuhiko Fukushima. "The animals fall asleep slowly and die almost naturally."

Last year, 5,539 dogs were put to sleep at the center. The number is almost 4,500 fewer than five years ago when the center began operations. The facility claims the reduction is due to its dog registration, neutering and programs to educate people about pets.

In the last five years, the center's puppy giveaway program has found homes for over 2,124 strays that would otherwise have been put to sleep.

The Aichi Animal Protection Center is a prefectural government organization headquartered in Toyoda, with branches in Ichinomiya, Handa and Toyohashi. The facilities were built at a total cost of over ¥1.2 billion and are run on an annual budget of ¥100 million.

The center provides dog-catching and veterinary services for the Aichi area.

All dogs put to sleep are done so at the Toyoda headquarters.

Thirty minutes after Sandy

entered the sleeping box, the carbon dioxide is turned off minutes and the dog's carcass is automatically dumped with others into a crematorium.

After four hours at 900 degrees, all that remains of Sandy is 30 grams of ash and teeth.

Every three weeks, about 200 kg of such remains are picked up by a private disposal company, taken to the mountains or sea and dumped in designated landfill sites that include industrial garbage, construction waste, and discarded appliances and furniture.

"We're just cleaning up after people with no morals," said Kato. "If people behaved responsibly toward their pet and didn't abandon it, then we wouldn't need this center. We don't want to be the ones to kill these animals. Would you?"

"Every morning before work, we gather in the office and pray for the souls of the animals we kill," he said. "We do this so as not to lose sight of the business of what we are doing: the taking of life."

In the last year up to March 1991, 350 dogs were put to sleep by government-run pounds nationwide. An estimate of 10 percent of these were abandoned dogs.