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Abandoned dogs on increase

Stray dogs fill cages at an Osaka animal control center.

Owning an animal in Japan has become a profitable venture recently for pet stores and other related companies, providing a major sales boom amid the lingering economic recession.

But if the latest local government statistics throughout the Kansai region are any indication, many pet owners in Japan are in the doghouse when it comes to actually taking care of their domesticated darlings.

At least 170,000 dogs are abandoned annually by pet owners in 17 prefectures in western Japan. In Osaka Prefecture alone in fiscal year 1991, 7,317 dogs were brought in to public health centers; 5,376 other strays were picked up from the streets. The dogs were later taken to dog control centers to be put to sleep.

Municipal animal control centers and animal rights groups alike are now calling into question the morals of such pet owners and starting to take their own action to stem the rising tide of homeless house pets nationwide.

"We are seeing an awakening of animal protection in local governments," according to Hitoshi Sugimoto, a spokesman for the Tokyo-based *Dobutsu-tachi no Kai* (Association for Animals). "But what's more important is that local administrative bodies are educating the dog owners themselves."

The Hyogo Prefectural Government, for one, is planning to submit an animal protection bill in February to the prefectural assembly.

Under the proposed ordinance, animal control officials may refuse to accept pet canines from owners who have no good reason for giving up their pets.

"There are far too many owners out there who are quick to abandon their dogs," said a prefectural spokesman. "They need to keep in mind that the dogs are living creatures too."

The Osaka Prefectural Government, under pressure from animal rights advocates, agreed in November 1992 to use a "sleeping drug" instead of poison to kill the hundreds of unwanted dogs brought in to the centers.

Such use of poisoning was commonplace among local governments, but is being continued by only eight prefectures in western Japan.

Nara and Hiroshima prefectures are taking preventive measures by encouraging citizens to adopt homeless pets.

The Kochi, Kagawa and Tottori prefectural governments are likewise giving away unwanted dogs to applicants.