

Bark can be bad as a bite

Problem:

The Roberts, an American family living in Tokyo, had to put up with their neighbor's barking dogs for over two years.

They tried everything including putting up thicker curtains, wearing ear plugs to bed, talking to and giving gifts to the offending neighbor, circulating a petition with signatures of other equally upset neighbors and complaining to the landlord who, herself bothered by the barking, consulted a lawyer. In addition they also reported the situation to the police, *ku-yakusho* and the Animal Protection League. Finally, since they were told that legally nothing could be done, they were forced to move.

Although they are happy in their new home (i.e. getting a good night's sleep) they are still left wondering how such a situation could be allowed to exist in Japan.

Joy:

Most expats have learned to put up with, or tune out, the many forms of noise pollution to be found in Japan, whether it be restaurants blasting music, excited announcements in department stores and supermarkets, taped lessons at scenic locations of natural beauty, hoarse hollering at political rallies, giggling girls, screaming kids, cellular phone users and *bôsôzoku*.

However much such short-lived sounds are unsettling to one's sense of equilibrium and privacy, the incessant barking of a neighborhood dog is where most Westerners would draw the line, not only for disturbing the peace and quiet expected to be found in one's home — a refuge from the noisy outside world — but also out of concern for the welfare of the obviously less-than-happy animal. Both the dog and those who are forced to hear it bark are victims of the offending neighbor. At such a point, it is not unusual for the expat to either question the sensitivity of the Jap-

anese to the rights of their own family as well as neighbors or to conclude that all Japanese must have an inordinately high tolerance level for noise.

For those (particularly Americans) who believe that problems should be confronted and dealt with, to think that nothing can be done about a situation goes against notions of fairness and justice and can lead to feelings ranging from helplessness to rage. In the U.S., to insure recourse for grievances regarding an unruly neighbor, there are nuisance ordinances which protect from offensive sights, sounds, odors or behavior which are unreasonable by community standards.

In the case of a barking dog, the offended party can go to court to obtain an injunction to restrain the cause of the nuisance. It would be unheard of in the U.S. for a barking dog to be allowed to continually annoy neighbors, let alone force them to find new housing.

More importantly, however, even with the erosion of neighborhoods and the increasingly litigious tendency of Americans, the ideal of being neighborly, of having a community spirit, still lingers to the degree that it is hoped that the kinds of problems found in one's own back yard can be settled right there — without the use of force by a third party.

Fumi:

Traditionally, quietness has been a valuable quality of Japanese life. With the introduction of industrial technology, however, the Japanese have accepted or become tolerant of noise as a necessary evil along with the modernization of the country. Loudspeaker announcements at stations, recorded tapes endlessly repeating the same message, etc. are all considered to be noise pollution, but even with regulations regarding appropriate noise levels,

laws are not always enforced — much to the unhappiness of the Japanese.

In dealing with annoying noise coming from one's neighbor such as barking dogs, stereo TV or piano playing the situation becomes a little less clearcut. While Japanese do like peace and quiet, when compared to Westerners, their tolerance level for noise is much higher. Having had to live close together, in small quarters and with little insulation, they have had to learn to screen out undesirable sounds.

Furthermore, Japanese have less of a sense of being neighborly since they began moving to large cities and no longer have the sense of responsibility and concern they had back in their close-knit villages. The boundaries of what is considered to be *uchi* or inside, member of a group or village, and *soto* or outside, not a member of a group or village, have become blurred, leaving some Japanese confused as to how to relate to or with neighbors — especially foreigners.

The Roberts are to be commended for taking all the correct steps (by Japanese standards) in trying to bring about a peaceful solution to a noisy problem. They should realize that the average Japanese would have responded positively long before it became necessary to consult a lawyer — the last recourse a Japanese would take. Most likely, any reasonable neighbor in this same situation would have either let the dogs live inside, given them away to relatives living in the country or, in some extreme cases, have taken them to a vet to have their vocal chords removed or to have them fitted with a shock-producing collar.

The fact that the Roberts tried everything, with no results, is a clear indication that Japan still has a long way to go in tackling the variety of problems associated with noise pollution.