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Animal rights awareness finally spreads to Japan

Animal rights advocates are firmly entrenched in Western society, and many of them seem to believe that Asians are cruel to animals. Considering that the culture of Europe and North America is one of meat-eaters and fur-coat wearers and that the Buddhist traditions of Asia forbid the killing of animals and regard even hills and rivers as deities and flowers as having potential Buddhahood, this label seems a strange contradiction.

My American friends and acquaintances know all about the fishing port on the Izu Peninsula where dolphins are herded onto the beach and clubbed to death, and I have been subjected to some pretty tough grilling about such practices. Western criticism of Japan as a major whaling country has as much to do with cruelty to animals as it does with environmental protection.

The women who stripped naked in front of a building in Yokohama where a fur trade fair was being held as a way of making the point that it is better to go naked than to wear fur were duly reported on CNN. When I saw them go to such extremes to make others feel guilty for wanting fur coats, I knew that the animal rights movement had finally come to Japan.

By my own personal rule of thumb, social trends in Europe and North America, and especially in the United States, always occur in Japan after a time lag of a few years. The length of time it takes to get here and the way the trend spreads once it does are different in every case, reflecting the differences in culture of East and West. This was true for feminist attitudes toward sexual harassment and the fitness boom. I expect that, along with an interest in environmental protection, an awareness of animal rights will soon make its way throughout Japan.

Along with whales, which Japanese enjoy eating, dogs are often cited as an example of Asian cruelty to animals. The Chinese habit of eating dog meat (especially in Guangzhou) is regarded as particularly disgusting and barbaric. Even worse, as part of a campaign against rabies in Beijing, dogs cannot be bought or sold as pets, and any dog bought or sold illegally is clubbed to death (see the Jan. 29 and Feb. 4 issues of The Economist).

The treatment of dogs in Japan is quite different than in China. If anything, their popularity as pets has grown too fast. From what I hear, the number of girls who want to become veterinarians is increasing annually.

Although Japanese do not club dogs to death or eat dog meat, one of the trends to emerge in the current pet boom is a tendency to regard animals as a kind of plaything. It is not uncommon for young mothers to buy a dog when their children are young and get rid of it when the children have grown up and left home as though the animal had outlived its usefulness.

People seem to have no qualms about getting rid of the puppies that result when a pet dog is not spayed. A friend of mine in Ito who cannot bear to see this happen now takes care of more than 24 abandoned dogs and cats. What I find unforgivable is the sheer selfishness of those who abandon their pets in front of this kind person's house.

If I were to comment on today's pet boom as a student of economics, I would say there is some connection between the social psychology behind the prevention of cruelty to animals and a country's state of development. A concern for the environment and for animals is apt to arise in those areas where the economy is prosperous and people lead comfortable lives.

Recently in New Jersey, a dog named Taro that had been sentenced to death for biting a child was given a reprieve on the condition that he never be allowed to return to New Jersey again. Thanks to the appeals of many people, a dog lover in New York took Taro in.

There is something absurd about a dog being the object of a legal battle, but isn't it a more desirable attitude toward life than that of people who throw away their pets as though they were rubbish or who stuff puppies or kittens into bags along with a few stones and toss them into a river?

Protesting cruelty to animals by going naked is one method, but all of us must realize that taking care of our own pets in responsible manner is an indicator of Japan's status as an advanced country and that doing so is one way to clear Japan's reputation for cruelty to animals.