

Food for Thought... and Cats and Dogs

It was the crows that drew my attention to it. Hundreds of them perched on crags and trees, circling, swooping, landing like a Hitchcock scenario. The focus of this funereal gathering was a tiny pup, not yet two months, lying immobile on a rock against a bleak mountain backdrop, miles from human habitation bar the rubble-laden trucks which belched past every few minutes. It had obviously been somebody's pet for a brief time, perhaps a new toy for the kids, for round its neck was a little collar complete with tinkling bells. Whatever thoughts possessed those temporary owners as they drove to that remote spot (no way could it have walked there by itself) dumped it together with a bowl of water and some food (incredibly they added this futile touch) and then drove off leaving it, exposed lonely and no doubt terror-stricken? Didn't they think that even before it had died of starvation, even before the crows had pecked it to pieces, even before it had frozen to death, it would have died of slow strangulation because of that frivolous decoration around its neck? Throwing away a pup is unspeakable enough, throwing one away with a collar around its neck is tantamount to sadism.

How long it had been frozen to that ledge I don't know, but it was a poor grey object I put in the car. A day later, after several warm shampoos it transformed into a white fluffy pup with black panda spots. The grey colour was not just dirt but the thousand (literally) ticks I unearthed from its coat. It would have been a toss-up which killed it first, the bloodsucking ticks and fleas or the crows. No doubt both would have

had a feast. This story has a happy ending. The pup now has a warm home with caring new owners.

Now a cat tale with a sad ending, one I hope will save other felines from the same fate. A friend kept a much pampered moggie in his apartment in Osaka. One day it was off-colour. Two days later when he went excitedly, anticipating its recovery, to collect it from the vet's, he was told it was dead. The cause? The vet said probably kidney failure as its breath smelt strongly of urea. What the vet didn't tell him was what may have caused this. There is no concrete evidence but I suspect dried cat food. Many vets know there is a link between dried food and kidney problems but don't publicise it. The problem lies in the high ash content of these biscuits which forms stones in the kidneys and are hard to expel especially in males. The cat suffers extreme pain and can die if the treatment is too late. Unfortunately dried food is a boon for apartment-bound cat owners and cats go crazy about them to such an extent that they'll even turn up their noses at conventional food when the biscuits are on offer. There are several prominent brand companies competing for this lucrative market which for obvious reasons I can't name but any dried food except the very expensive imported dietary types, are potentially dangerous if fed in excess. They should be regarded as a snack not the main meal. Remember to put a large bowl of water nearby as they are very thirst-inducing. In summer, especially when nobody likes the smelly remains of fish lying around, it's better to leave out dried fish (*jako*) as a snack rather than biscuits. Too often people believe what is written on packets, what the manufacturers want them to believe – it's more to do with profit for the company than benefit for cats or dogs.

Here are some of the things you can feed your pet as an economical nutritious alternative to canned or processed food.

Base:

Rice. Unpolished rice (*genmai*) is best but needs a longer cooking time than the usual white rice. Broken or old rice (*kogome*) is available at harvest time from friendly farmers.

Wheat (*mugi*) is very cheap as it's imported as cattle food. Can be bought at agricultural cooperatives (*nokyo*). Around ¥800/20kg.

Spaghetti or noodles (pre-cooked). Often discounted at supermarkets.

Breadcrusts (*pan-no mimi*). Sold very cheaply from under the counter at bakeries if you ask for it.

Meat. Some can be used raw but generally best cooked.

Beef tendon/scraps (*suji*), around ¥600-700/kg.

Chicken (*kashiwa*), ¥600-1,000/kg.

Chicken liver (*tori kimo*), ¥600-800/kg.

Fish. Sardines (*iwashi*). Cheap and nourishing with bones but need de-gutting. A box of these costs around ¥600.

The list of fresh fish is endless and prices vary with season. If you patronise a fishmonger's tell them you keep a cat/dog and ask them to put aside cheap fish for you. Fish goes off so quickly that they are happy to offload their unsold surplus.

Dried bonito flakes (*katsuo bushi*).

Dried small fish (*jako*). Full of calcium as well as convenient to use and store. Buy in bulk from dried fish store.

Other Foods:

Eggs and cheese. Raw or cooked make for variety.

Vegetables/fruit. Some animals are addicted to fruit. Mix vegetables with meat or other things. When you are out for a walk and your dog wants to eat grass, let it. It will then be sick but the grass is like a medicine for clearing out whatever disagreeable thing it has eaten.

Garlic is medicinal as well as nutritious.

Milk. Good as a calcium source for adult animals but while cows' milk is ideal for calves it is unsuitable for puppies and kittens. Better to buy special prepared milk for them at the vet's or a pet shop.

Foods to Avoid:

Bones, except for large rounded beef bones or small fish bones like those found in sardines. Chicken and carp (*koi*) bones are **extremely dangerous** as they splinter and pierce the intestines if they haven't already stuck in the throat.

Sweets, Cakes and the like lead to obesity and diabetes – yes animals have the same problems as humans.

Food with a **high content of salt/shoyu/sugar/fat** like sukiyaki/Chinese food/the remains of New Year *o-sechi ryori*.

Onions. Many dogs are allergic and get sick from these.

In this household, because the numbers vary from day to day (my own gang plus the many strays brought in or picked up) I usually boil up meat/fish and vegetables to make a basic stock then add rice and wheat, and cook slowly until the stock is absorbed. Other things can be added to supplement this basic mix. Feeding cheap dried biscuits is the beginning of a long expensive road to the vet's.

Postscript. Picked up yet another stray this week, abandoned in nearly the same place as the little panda pup. This one a young female Beagle-cross. Around her neck was a black collar inscribed in vivid yellow letters '**Happy Life.**' If only dogs could speak!

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