

Organically Speaking

I stole a dog the other day. Not because I need another dog, this place is already inundated with them, nor because the dog in question was rare or valuable. Quite the opposite in fact, a non-descript mongrel. She was tied next to a shack on a bleak exposed mountainside, sheltering as best she could against the penetrating winds, eight newborn puppies. Her previous litter had survived and grown and were by now becoming a general nuisance around the village especially to chicken keepers. As always happens in this sort of case someone complains to the city office who in turn call the *hokensho* (public dog catchers) who rush to the scene with nooses and nets to catch the offenders. The wiliest escape while the more friendly ones are caught and transported off for execution.

The hokensho went to look at the source of all this trouble, but as far as they were concerned no law had been broken, the mother dog was chained (as the law insists). The fact she had no shelter, the fact she had no water, only dried, salt-laden, thirst-inducing dog biscuits (in spite of having pups to nurse), the fact she was breeding uncontrollably and that in six months they'd have eight more dogs to catch, wasn't their concern. I made it my concern and loaded her and the pups into the car to bring home. As I did so I had a twinge of conscience, what if an irate owner came hammering on my door or worse still seeking revenge in some way. To cover myself I stopped at the police station and reported what I'd done and why. Now if the owner came I could refer him to the police. (Police have become firm allies since I took an itinerant goat off their hands earlier this year). I made a few surreptitious enquiries about this

irresponsible owner. Locals opined that since the field around the shack was full of weeds, he must be one of those 'organic' blokes. He lived in the town and came once every two or three weeks to dump a bag of dog food at the shack, they said. Their low opinion of him was not because he neglected the dog but because he neglected the field. All this set me wondering what 'organic' really means. If 'organic' believers treat animals so badly, how do they relate to the vegetables they grow and the consumers who buy them?

Organic farming is nothing new. Indeed it was the ordinary way to farm until fairly recently. But as consumer demand for mass produced cheap food has grown, so farmers have embraced the latest agro-technology to protect their crops, increase yields and put more money in their pockets. However the tide is turning. Consumers having got all the food they want are now beginning to worry whether or not it's safe. Scares about food safety abound; salmonella, listeria, suddenly everything we eat is poisoned. Mass media reporting only fuels the hysteria. Organic farming is having a revival but is it just a passing fad? Is it commercially viable from the farmer's point of view and more important will consumers in general be prepared to pay the inevitably higher prices for their food?

There's been a tendency both here and abroad to regard organic farming with a fair amount of skepticism, even ridicule. In Britain organic farmers are likely to be sick-of-the-rat-race-townies who scrape together a bit of capital to buy a remote smallholding. There they faithfully build compost piles, keep a medley of commercially-unattractive animals; Jerseys rather than Friesians, Jacob sheep rather than Suffolks, Fat-bellied Vietnamese pigs rather than Landrace and more recently, exotica like angora goats, llamas, even earthworms. To make ends meet they sell goats milk, yoghurt and cheese at the farm gate. Their efforts seldom bring them commercial success,

indeed they spend a lot of their time grovelling in front of the local bank manager, but they have the satisfaction of at least being able to feed and clothe themselves. An unlikely person has recently appeared to champion their cause. Prince Charles no less. Agri-biz farmers, he declares, have for too long been saturating their land with chemicals, ripping up hedgerows and pastureland, annihilating wildlife in the process and turning their farms into wheat prairies. Farmers naturally aren't too happy about someone they consider a hobby farmer telling them how to run their business, but he's got a point. A Government survey of Britain's farmland reveals that unless present farming methods are drastically reviewed much of the land will become desert (not exactly a Sahara but dead from the point of view of cultivation) within three decades. Erosion is not a problem exclusive to third world countries in Africa and Asia, it is also occurring at an alarming rate in the rich farmlands of Northern Europe, not to mention America. Already 44% of Britain's arable land is at risk.

Here in Japan 'organic' encompasses a whole set of images ranging from the far lefties and the environmental or 'green' lobby, through religion-orientated groups down to ordinary housewives who just want safer food for their families to eat. It can take over one's entire lifestyle and philosophy as in the Yamagishi Kai (K.T.O April 89) or it can just mean the difference between tipping a barrowload of farmyard manure onto the field instead of bag of nitrate pellets. To some like those who follow Fukuoka Masanobu (author of *One Straw Revolution*), it means no cultivation whatsoever, just leaving nature to sort things out. The attractions of Fukuoka's methods to many people is that his 'doing nothing' style of farming seems an easy way out. Many of his disciples have fallen by the wayside by picking up a few of his techniques (usually the lazy ones) but lacking his patience and his lifetime's experience of how to put them into practice.

One such disciple started about a dozen years ago when the organic boom was just taking off. Being close to the town he quickly established a network of organic hungry housewives all keen to pay high prices for holey cabbages and curvy cucumbers.

The fact that he always appeared unshaven and reeking of manure only enhanced his image and thrilled them more. Business boomed, so much in fact that he couldn't supply the demand. But instead of confessing honestly that he didn't have enough, he sneaked off to the Central Market and bought a truckload of ordinary chemical vegetables which he then flogged off as organic. He was **found out** which in this country means that you either have to emigrate or change your identity. Nevertheless in spite of this setback he began again with a fresh network of gullible consumers. To prove his organic authenticity he has groups of town women in need of exercise coming up to weed the fields. At times when he can't get volunteers and when the weeds are rife, what does he do?

A fair question and one which all organic farmers sooner rather than later have to face. Although the definition of organic is very vague and open to a whole range of interpretations, those who opt for organic farming should pick one kind of system and stick with it. It takes a fair amount of courage to abandon dependency on chemical aids and risk losing everything to weeds, insects, fungi or whatever. It's easy to reach for the weedkillers or herbicides when things go wrong.

The organic war is hotting up. At the time of writing a decision is pending in a Hokkaido court. The plaintiff, an apple grower, is claiming that wind-borne fungus spored blow from his organic neighbour's orchard onto his trees, rendering the apples unfit for sale. He demands this man be made to use chemicals to control the spread of the diseases. A petition is being launched among consumers to support the right of

organic farmers to farm without chemicals. Since this is the first case of its kind in Japan, it will be interesting to see what the outcome is.

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