

Pond Life, Pond Death

Few people can boast of a private double Olympic-size pool a stone's throw from their house, ours is called 'The Pond'. It is literally that, a small lake ringed by mountains where on a hot summer's day you can float mindlessly under a clear blue sky letting stress and heat ebb away.

Before discovering 'The Pond', 'going for a swim' meant a 3 hour battle in traffic jams to reach the Japan Sea. A couple of days relaxation was wiped out by the hot bumper to bumper return journey. It seemed too good to be true, finding a swimming place so close where not only one didn't have to jostle for water space with hundreds of other bodies, but actually one where there wasn't a soul in sight. All this has changed somewhat as I shall now reveal, but for a decade or more the pond was (is) our exclusive swimming pool and picnic spot. Locals who cram into the contaminated chlorinated confines of the village pool wouldn't dream of swimming in the pond. Too deep they say, too frightening, god-knows-what might be lurking there. Certainly you can get quickly out of your depth, but for nervous swimmers there are plenty of creepers along the bank to hang on to. At one end is a sloping sandy beach where a stream feeds into the pond, at the other it flows out over a small dam. Although man-made as an emergency irrigation supply in time of drought, it looks and feels natural. Only once have I ever seen it nearly dry, when there was a drought and the pond water released, surged along channels to distant paddies emptying the pond.

Of course we have to share the pond with a certain amount of wild life, insects like water boatmen, turtles and occasional aquatic silvery snakes which criss cross the water minding their own business. I always

get the feeling we are being watched by a multitude of eyes not all innocent ones either. Recently the pond has been discovered by fishermen. Fishing and swimming don't mix. By diving in they claim we frighten the fish away from the lines which they have sat patiently beside all day. We see them as rubbish dumpers. Not only discarded bento boxes and drink cans but needle-sharp fish hooks which can spike bare feet and nylon lines unseen by animals until they get entangled in them. One perennial invader is 'Mr. Pond'. While he paddles around the pond planting baits, we suspect his thoughts are not only on fishing. Sometimes he lurks in bushes hoping perhaps for a glimpse of nubile maidens frolicking in the water. Fat hope of that as our volunteers are well-built, muscular and well able to defend themselves. In winter he swaps the boat for a cavernous jeep filled with gaunt hunting dogs which bay and strain on chains. Somehow with a gun in his hand he seems more ominous. As if to make amends for his peculiarities and prove he's a really nice guy he's chopped and carted enough timber from the mountains for the stove to last a couple of years. Where he comes from or what he does, is a mystery. But then the pond is full of mysteries.

Last year readers may recall there was a botched murder near the pond. An old man was abducted in Tottori and brought to Nose. They trussed him up and weighed him down by heavy wooden beams and buried him in sand with a futon over his head. It was only by chance that a family of hikers discovered him still alive. Their child thinking there was a frog croaking under the futon lifted it up to discover the old man's head poking up from the sand. The culprits were speedily caught and admitted to kidnapping him for insurance money.

Yet another case the other day. Old man out for a walk strolling along path by house. Recognised him as neighbour who cultivates adjoining rice field. Local gossip has it that he is going (has gone) gaga. Certainly he was acting a bit strange, rubbing his hands constantly and mumbling. But since the road past the house is an ancient pilgrim track from Mt.

Myoken (a temple complex) to Okunoin also a temple, we get more than our fair share of eccentrics passing by. Shuffling figures in religious robes, decapitated by upturned baskets beating skin drums, others urgently panting up the track rubbing beads and chanting sutras, some adorned in tinkling belts. So another old man following the same path didn't seem odd except I noted he was thinly dressed for a cold late afternoon. Went back in without giving him a second thought. Later in the evening sitting down relaxing by the fire, the phone rang. Had we seen the old man, relatives asked. Within minutes a stream of vehicles passed. Too late, they found him submerged in the pond. Seems it was suicide. Not wishing to burden his family anymore and probably fearful of being imprisoned in a hospital he decided in a final moment of clarity to end his life in familiar surroundings. We found white chrysanthemums floating on the silent pond the next day – a sad gesture.

Now the pond is coming to life again. Soon the din of cicadas, the croak of bull-frogs and the plops of fish as they break the surface will mean the swimming season is nearing. Let's hope for a drama-free summer and that Mr. Pond stays well away.

Elizabeth Oliver

Although it's tempting to plunge into a cool mountain lake after a hot hike certain precautions should be taken. While the surface temperature appears warm, the cold may give a severe shock to your system. Some ponds are full of hidden obstacles, discarded rusty cans and bottles, fallen trees, roots and creepers. Keep a weather eye open for mamushi, especially late summer. They don't like swimming but love to bask on sandy banks in long grass or in stone crevices near ponds. Wiser to swim in company than alone & refrain from adding to the pile of other people's garbage by carrying your own home.

TALKING ABOUT ANIMALS

Do animals have the right to enjoy their lives?

Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, Peter Singer is often referred to as the “father” of animal liberation and his book *Animal Liberation*, the publication in 1975 of which gave rise to awareness about animals and inspired a new, dynamic animal liberation movement worldwide, as the “bible”. He will be giving a series of two-hour talks in the Kansai area as follows.

June 4, Osaka: 14:00, Senri Shimin Centre (06-834-0054), in front of Minami seri stn. (Hankyu Senri line); 19:00, *Open Forum on Animal Issues - with Elizabeth Oliver, Director, ARK (Animal Refuge Kansai)*, Amenity Senri (06-878-0012), Suita City, Higashi Yamada, 2-chome 2-13 (Hankyu Senri line, Yamada stn. bus to Shin Ogawa, 4 stops).

June 5, Kyoto: 19:00, Kyoto Kyoiku Bunka Centre (075-771-4221), 4-13 Kawahara-cho, Shogoin, Sakyo-ku (Buses from Kyoto stn [206], Shijo Kawaramachi [31, 201, 203] to Kumano Shrine, and from Sanjo Keihan to Kawabata Murata-cho).

Sponsored jointly by Japan Environmental Exchange and ARK.

June 6, Nose: 14:00, ARK (072-737-0712), 595 Noma Ohara, Toyono-gun, Nose-cho, Osaka-fu 563-0131 (Hankyu Nose line to Myokenguchi stn. Transport from station provided upon request).

Admission is free but donations to the cause would be appreciated.

Information: ARK - Animal Refuge Kansai (072-737-0712)