

Unkind Kindness

‘Be kind to Animals Week’ from September 20th through 26th was established to “enhance interest and understanding among the people concerning the protection and proper methods of keeping animals”. This is quotation from Article 2, Law 105 Concerning the Protection and Control of Animals (Oct. 1973). Never heard of Law 105? Looking around at the way animals are treated, nobody else has either. In fact, when we examine this law more closely, we find it has little to do with animal protection and everything to do with protecting people and property from animals.

The law stems from just after the war, when in an effort to stamp out rabies, zealous dog catchers employed by the government noosed every stray dog in sight and butchered them in full view of the people. Nowadays they drag them off to dog control centres (Kanri Centres), where the animals are killed just as brutally, but out of sight so that the public will believe things have got better – which of course they haven’t. Official dog killers make no pretence about loving or even liking animals. They regard them as just another kind of vermin.

Far more sinister, however, are the dog or cat ‘lovers’, especially those whom I term ‘animal collectors’. These are people who save animals from certain death at the Kanri Centres, but whose initial kindness turns into neglect, neglect into cruelty and, as numbers increase, even prolonged torture.

One case I want to highlight is the Tenri hellhole which I visited in June before the rains and the summer heat. Despite attention by the media and protests by animal welfare activists this situation still exists at the time of writing.

Shiny, sleek, foreign limousines whisk their owners and clients along the road leading to the Tenri Country Club. No one spares a glance at the dump on the road side. But if they stopped, they would be immediately overwhelmed by the pervasive smell of decay and death. The animals inside are stacked in cages, or tied in such a way that they're unable to escape from their own urine and excrement which ooze out all over the ground. Anyone entering is forced by the filth to wear knee-high rubber boots. The animals' motionless skeletons are festering near to death, eaten away by ticks and fleas and scavenged by hunger and thirst. Waiting for the food and water they crave but cannot get, their eyes are pools of sadness, pleas for help.

The iron bars and chains are outward symbols of this torture, because, for these pathetic, innocent creatures there is no escape – only a slow lingering death. Side by side with the living is a mountain of black plastic bags spilling out the rotting carcasses of those that have mercifully died. A mountain is exactly what it is. How many years have passed, how many bodies? The stench of the dead and the living dead mingle. Dog eats dog – remnants of hair and bone litter the ground. Fights break out as the prisoners struggle to grab these grisly remains.

There are two prefabricated structures. One is the old man's house – filled with rotting refuse and bedding – within which is yet another minute room crammed with cats. It is here that he apparently sleeps. The second prefab is filled from wall to wall, floor to ceiling with cages, each one containing three or four dogs. The cage space has shrunk by half as putrid faeces drop from the top cages onto the occupants below, and again on those below them.

Hairless, frenzied animals, food-less and water-less, their paws and claws gripping the bare mesh. These tortured creatures are boarded by the old man for a crazy old woman who visits periodically. He doesn't feed or water them between her visits. This uninsulated shack becomes a furnace in the summer.

Who or what has created this nightmare? The gaoler, a senile and feeble torturer crawls out of his hut. He can hardly walk – one wouldn't trust him with the care of one dog let alone the 80 dogs and 120 cats he has collected (we have no accurate count of the numbers) – yet he claims to be an *animal lover*. People think of him as such and in a steady flow condemn their unwanted pets to his death camp.

This place mirrors hundreds of tiny ghettos all over Japan where animals are collected, kept by lonely old people because they originally feel sorry for them and are against killing. Certainly, the inhuman, brutal methods employed by local authorities to kill and catch animals makes people seek any alternative – except euthanasia. But when numbers build up and these 'Samaritans' reach the limits of their economic and physical ability to cope, kindness turns into cruelty. Dog pounds are paradises in comparison to these hell-holes.

A greater tragedy, however, is the unbelievable fact that there is nothing that can be done to stop this man keeping his hell-hole of misery nor in taking in more if he pleases. There is no effective law in this country to protect animals from lunatic torturers like this. The Hokensho in Tenri has been there many times, not to save the animals, but from concern about hygiene. But even though it must break every hygiene code in the book, no action has been taken.

It is shameful that Nara Prefecture allows this place to exist, let alone expand. The local government and central government are equally apathetic. Many Japanese who saw the TBS film actually sympathise with the old man for having to cope with so many animals – they send him donations and/or more animals. Those initially shocked by the plight of the animals soon forget – everyone prefers to ignore or block out the memory. It's an easy way out.

Elizabeth Oliver

We have prepared protest postcards for Nara Prefecture about their lack of action in dealing with this case. Foreign protest is more effective than protest from within Japan. Anyone willing to send postcards to friends and relatives overseas can contact me by fax or phone or mail giving name, address and number of postcards required: Elizabeth Oliver, 595 Noma Ohara, Nose-cho, Toyono-gun, Osaka-fu 563-0131. (Tel: 072-737-0712. Fax: 072-737-1886.)