

RECENT CHANGES OF ANIMAL SHELTERS IN JAPAN

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In 2012, about 77% of 209,388 animals that entered Japanese public animal shelters were put down.¹ Visiting animal shelters in other countries such as Spain, the UK and the U.S., I have realized that Japanese animal shelters are quite closed facilities and not willing to provide open information to allow comparison with shelters in other countries. People in Japan rarely visit animal shelters and some irresponsible owners buy dogs and cats from pet shops only later to abandon them. However, the recent legal and structural changes of public animal shelters have shown some positive changes.

I. Background of Japanese Animal Shelters

Japanese public animal shelters were established to protect citizens from hydrophobia (rabies). The structure of the buildings and the regulation regarding animal shelters reflected this initial purpose for the animal shelters. For instance, unlike animal shelters in Europe, most public animal shelters in Japan have gas chamber to efficiently

¹ The Ministry of Environment (MOE), Statistics of dogs and cats in public animal shelters, (2012)
http://www.env.go.jp/nature/dobutsu/aigo/2_data/statistics/dog-cat.html

euthanize animals with carbon dioxide. Because shelters were made to euthanize street dogs, they only have limited rooms, typically about four to five rooms. Dogs are moved from one room to the next each day, towards the gas chamber.

However, rabies has not been found in Japan since 1956.² Thus, the current structure of Japanese animal shelters has been criticized as an outdated facility by animal advocates in Japan for decades.³ Considering the complaints from animal advocates, the law has been changed recently.

II. Legal Changes of public animal shelter in 2012

Recent amendments to the Act on Welfare and Management of Animals (the Animal Welfare Law) in Japan were enforced in September 2013 and one of the main changes is an introduction of language regarding animal shelters.

Before the 2012 amendment, the Animal Welfare Law had mandated shelter staffs to accept animals brought to shelters for euthanization in order to avoid rabies from stray dogs. This obligation to accept animals had been a burden to some staff aiming to establish no-kill shelters. For instance, Masayosi Matsuzaki, the director of the public animal shelter in Kumamoto, stated that the law prevented them from refusing to accept animals from irresponsible pet owners.⁴

Therefore, article 35 of the 2012 amendment reflected the changing purpose of public animal shelters in Japan. The amendment created an exemption of the duty for government shelters to accept animals brought to animal shelters. Now, public

² The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Q&A regarding rabies, (last viewed on March 20, 2014) <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/kenkou/kekkaku-kansenshou10/07.html>

³ All Life In Viable Environment (ALIVE), Proposals to achieve reduce number of animal disposal, (2006) <http://www.alive-net.net/companion-animal/hikitori/isitubutuhou/isitu-slidet10ml.html>

⁴ Speech by Masayoshi Matsuzaki at a symposium of the Animal Welfare Act Revision, (June 4, 2011) <http://blogs.yahoo.co.jp/qdkbd678/61822457.html>

shelters can refuse to accept animals for euthanization from animal handlers of pet business and irresponsible companion animal owners, who repeatedly bring animals to shelters without neutering their animals.

In addition, the article requires shelter staff to give their best effort to return lost animals to owners and to increase the adoption rate. Thus, there is more pressure on the staff of public shelters to reduce number of animals being euthanized, and encouragement for staff to be educators to make owners and the pet industries more responsible.

III. Visit to Public Animal Shelter of Yokohama City

Not only the law, but structures of some animal shelters have started to change recently and an animal shelter in Yokohama represents the change. I visited the shelter in the summer of 2012, and witnessed the new era of public animal shelters in Japan. In 2012, of the 408 dog that entered the shelter, 203 were returned to owners, 117 were adopted, and 72 were euthanized or died a natural death.⁵ For cats, 545 cats were adopted out of the 1556 cats that entered the shelter. Compared to the national rate of adopted and returned animals, the rate was two times higher in Yokohama in 2012.⁶

After spending twenty years to develop ideas, Yokohama's dobutsu aigo center, or animal protection center, was rebuilt in May of 2011 as a place that establishes "an

⁵ Website of Yokohama City, Health and Social Welfare Bureau of Yokohama, Achievement Records, (updated on September 21, 2013) <http://www.city.yokohama.lg.jp/kenko/hokenjo/genre/douai/about/performance.html>

⁶ MOE, Statistics, (last viewed on March 21, 2014), http://www.env.go.jp/nature/dobutsu/aigo/2_data/statistics/dog-cat.html

environment where people and animals can live together.”⁷ The new shelter was very clean and is located on a residential street. Unlike the typical Japanese animal shelters explained above, the animal shelter of Yokohama City had separate rooms for each dog (10m x 2m in total). When I visited the shelter, half of the individual rooms were empty. According to a staff of the shelter, staff members take dogs to a walk when the weather is nice (though there would be complaints from neighbors if they take animals outside too much.) There were several Chihuahuas there as it was a popular breed in 2012.⁸ Cats were inside of a little cathouse, and there were toys handmade by the staff to save money.

There were three reasons to renovate the shelter. First, the shelter was very old and it needed to be rebuilt somehow. In addition, the old shelter was made to remove stray dogs to protect citizens from rabies. However, since rabies had not found for decades, a new facility that improved animal related administration was needed. Moreover, some local politicians started to become concerned about overpopulation issues of companion animals after receiving many complaints from animal advocates. Among about 400 dogs that entered the shelter in 2010, about 120 dogs were adopted, roughly 200 dogs were returned to owners, about 45 dogs were euthanized due to the illness, and the rest are under its care for future adoption.

In the western country like the UK, animal shelters function as temporary house for animals that will be adopted. Shelters expect people to adopt animals from them. However, as the staff I talked to said, it is still not common to adopt animals from shelters in Japan. So adoption in Japan needs to be processed more carefully.

Through the better education the shelter provides and collaboration with volunteers, the staff explained, fewer animals entered the shelter which is great news for animal welfare in the city of Yokohama.

⁷ Website of Yokohama City, Animal Shelter of Yokohama City, (updated on September 21, 2013) <http://www.city.yokohama.lg.jp/kenko/hokenjo/genre/douai/joto/pre.html> (last viewed on March 21, 2014)

⁸ Anicom Insurance Incorporation, Ranking of popular dog breeds, (January 31, 2012) http://www.anicom-sompo.co.jp/breed/dog_2012.html

Although Japan still euthanizes about 161,000 dogs and cats yearly,⁹ the number has dramatically dropped from 394,799 in 2004. Animal advocates in Japan hope the 2012 amendment will reduce the number of animals entering animal shelters and increase the adoption rate. Considering the recent legal and structural changes of public animal shelters, the future of companion animals in Japan has become somewhat brighter.

⁹ The Ministry of Environment (MOE), Statistics of dogs and cats in public animal shelters, (2012), *supra*