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John Knight

Bonding with the Nonhuman World: Why People Feed Wildlife in Japan

Feeding wild animals, or *esayari*, is something of a national pastime in Japan. During my fieldwork in villages on the Kii Peninsula, I have met or heard about many people who regularly feed animals. These include a man who feeds sweetfish to kites in the summer and has learned to imitate the kite's cry to attract the birds; a retired postman who every evening after dinner puts leftover food out for a family of raccoon-dogs; and a woman (a keen follower of the Buddhist sect Sōka Gakkai) who scatters oranges in the nearby forest for the wild monkeys to feed on. This feeding behavior is not limited to wildlife as normally understood. On the island of Shōdoshima I met a man who feeds large numbers of stray cats on a daily basis. He told me with pride that he doesn't just feed them with tins of cat food, but routinely visits the supermarket just before closing time and buys up all the cut-price packets of sashimi that have reached their sell-by date to feed to the cats.

It is not only local people who feed the wildlife of the peninsula. Tourists and recreationists are also keen animal feeders. Tourists feed animals in and around many of the temples, shrines, beauty spots, and other sights they visit. Visitors are also prone to the roadside feeding of animals. The sight and sound of a car pulling up on a mountain road may well trigger the approach of monkeys or deer to the side of the road, hopeful of a food handout through the side window. Hikers in the mountains also feed animals they come across. Many an amateur photographer uses food to stage photographs of birds and animals encountered in the mountains. They carry bags of feed with which to lure their subject to get a close-up photo or to frame the photo against a scenic backdrop.

Food-giving behavior is evident elsewhere in the Japanese leisure sector. In public parks and gardens people routinely feed pigeons, crows, ducks, and swans, as well as carp and other fish in ponds. There is much uncontrolled, spontaneous feeding of wildlife in tourist locales, ranging from the feeding of doughnuts to foxes and sausages to bears in Hokkaido to the feeding of tropical fish off the coast of Okinawa. In open-range monkey parks, known as *yaen kōen* or "wild monkey parks," visitors are given the opportunity to feed the "wild monkeys" of the park by hand. The parks have long marketed themselves to the public by depicting the hand-feeding of monkeys as the highlight of the visit. In

the 1960s one well-known monkey park lured visitors with the catchphrase “*yaseizaru ga anata no te kara esa o torimasu*” or “wild monkeys will take food from your hand.”

I have long been intrigued by *esayari* behavior and the reasons behind it. One reason for its popularity may well be the sense of achievement it gives the human food-giver. Turning a wary, flighty animal into one that not only tolerates a human presence but accepts human food handouts is no mean feat. This gradual process of habituation demands considerable patience on the human side. In this form, *esayari* is more than mere feeding—it is “transformative feeding” that creates a relatively tame animal. The food-giver can take pride in having persuaded a hitherto fugitive animal to take food from his or her hand.

In other cases, the human food-giver encounters already tame animals. This is evident from the bold behavior of the animal when it actively begs people for food, especially from people who are eating something themselves. In this situation it is the animal that is taking the initiative, behaving in a way that prompts the person to give it some food. This is not a transformative achievement, at least not by this particular feeder. The feeder is simply feeding an animal already “tamed” by others.

Another reason seems to be that the feeder takes pity on the animal. A common word applied to such animals is *kawaiisō* or “pitiable.” The animal in question is deemed to be in need of the food handouts and the human feeder can think of himself or herself as doing a good deed. The food-giver may well think that the neediness of the animal is obvious from the eagerness with which the animal takes the food, and indeed may infer from this that, without this food offering, the animal would go hungry, if not starve altogether.

Such a perception appears to be common in winter (especially at times of snowfall, which can be heavy in parts of Japan) when natural forage is at its scarcest. Food-giving behavior tends to take place in this season more than others. But food-givers may equally invoke artificial food scarcity to justify their food-giving behavior. Those who practice *esayari* may attribute the scarcity of natural foods to the transformation of the Japanese mountain forest in recent decades associated with modern forestry. This usually carries the implication that, since the problems facing the animals are man-made, humans like themselves are morally obliged to try and make amends by providing food handouts.

There are now campaigns against the feeding of wildlife across Japan. As a result of habitat loss caused by developmental encroachment, wildlife populations live in ever closer proximity to the human population, and in many cases engage in crop-raiding. *Esayari* behavior only serves to accelerate this process of spatial convergence as the animals lose their fear of humans and acquire a taste for human foods—two factors which tend to lead to, or to intensify, crop-raiding on nearby farmland. This puts wildlife at loggerheads with residents, who may well respond by demanding that the animals be culled.

There is a growing recognition in Japan that this habit of feeding wildlife needs to be stopped. Prefectural governments have launched campaigns to discourage it and municipal governments have passed ordinances banning it. In the city of Minō, people caught feeding monkeys face a fine of 10,000 yen. In the city of Nikkō, persistent feeders of animals are threatened with the penalty of having their names published in what amounts to a name and shame policy. Slogans and set-phrases aimed at discouraging *esayari* now abound in flyers, on posters, and on signposts. Here are some examples:

“Wild animals are not pets.”

“For the sake of coexistence with humans, stop feeding pigeons.”

“Wild monkeys come down to the village and cause a nuisance.

Please don't feed them.”

“To protect their way of life, please do not feed the deer.”

“Food is something we [animals] will find for ourselves.”

“Offering food is not the same thing as love.”

Part of the message is that wild animals are not pets and should not be treated as pets. By implication, the Japanese public is mistaking the wild animals of the forest for pets that need to be cared for, rather than the autonomous wild creatures they really are. The other part of the message is that the feeding of wild animals is not an act of kindness because it has negative consequences for the animals, the most serious of which is culling. In sum, while people may believe that feeding wildlife is an act of kindness that helps the animals, in reality it is an act of folly that harms the animals.