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Why Is There a Big Difference in The Number of Stray Cats and Dogs in Japan?



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ABSTRACT

Stray animals are a huge problem in Japan. Until the 1980s, stray dogs were a common sight in Japanese cities and towns. However, recent population estimates of stray animals indicate a sharp rise in the number of cats, far exceeding the number of dogs. This is because certain stringent measures were taken to control the stray dog population while no such measures have been taken for cats. But it is possible to manage and control the number of cats through a change in the behavior of residents towards stray cats for instance, through collective initiatives such as the 'communally owned cat'. Therefore, a change in people's behavior is crucial to controlling the number of stray cats. This will also avoid unnecessary measures such as capture and culling of cats by health centers.

INTRODUCTION

Stray dogs were a common sight in Japanese cities until the 1980s. It was common to observe large number of dogs congregating at roadsides and parks, and sometimes attacking children. However, in recent years, stray dogs have rarely been seen in Japan unlike in other Asian countries where their numbers are still high¹⁾. Thus, this decrease cannot be attributed to environmental factors, such as climate change and canine diseases. In contrast, many stray cats continue to be seen. Evidence indicates that in Japan the number of pet cats is higher than the number of pet dogs. As shown in Fig. 1, until 2016, the number of pet dogs in Japan was higher than that of the cats. In 2017, there were 8,920,000 dogs and 9,526,000 cats and the number of cats continues to increase, even though the number of dogs is decreasing²⁾. This difference of less than 10% does not explain the drastic decrease in the number of stray dogs. In this paper, we examine the reasons why the number of stray cats is still high, even though the number of stray dogs has decreased sharply, and suggest ways to control or reduce the population of stray cats. However, it is important to differentiate between housecats, stray cats, and wild cats³⁾. Wild cats do not live among people. In contrast, stray cats are unowned cats^{4),5)} and include cats abandoned by their owners or offspring of such cats. These cats may also be food-provisioned by people either outdoors or indoors. In contrast to wild cats, stray cats are not reluctant to receive food from people and are distinguished by the fact that they are abundant in residential areas. A housecat is owned, managed, and bred by a person.

Reproductive cycles of dogs and cats and their litter sizes

Species-specific differences in physiology and behavior of dogs and cats may underlie differences in their populations. Dogs and cats differ in the number of breeding seasons they have in a year. According to breeders, dogs can give birth about three times a year, while cats can give birth about four times a year⁶⁾. In the case of free-ranging animals, there are reports that both cats and dogs reproduce twice a year, in spring and autumn⁷⁾. The average number of pups in a litter is 6-10, whereas the average number of kittens is 3-5 per litter^{7),8)}. The average number of pups born in a year is 30 or less per dog, whereas the average number of kittens per cat per year is 20 or less. However, this does not consider animal birth control measures. Since some dogs are much larger than cats, it is difficult to keep multiple dogs in a house because of the size

of the location. While cats do not necessarily require walking by their owners, dogs need to be walked. Thus, sterilization surgery may be necessary to prevent unwanted pups, and it is thought that it will affect the number of animals raised per household (Fig. 2). Moreover, compared to dogs that stay indoors in an air-conditioned room for a long time and go out only when taking a walk, cats that have outdoor access are more likely to remain outside¹⁾. These cats may have a longer breeding season and come into estrus frequently. As shown in Figs.1 and 2, the number of cats is only about twice as large as the number of the dog. There seems to be another factor that has a strong influence on the number of stray animals.

Factors causing differences in the number of stray animals

There are several possible reasons for the vast difference in the number of stray dogs and stray cats^{1),5)}. Most of these are due to measures to control the dog population. First, dogs were actively protected by enforcing the Rabies Prevention Law (RPL). Second, the number of dogs that were traditionally kept outdoors as guard dogs have decreased, and many dogs are kept indoors as pet animals. Third, the number of unlicensed breeders is decreasing. Fourth, raising dogs is more expensive than raising cats. These are described in greater detail below.

Rabies is a zoonotic disease that is transmitted to humans from infected animals primarily through bites. Once the symptoms develop, it is almost 100 % fatal. Japan implemented the RPL in 1950, requiring owners to register and vaccinate their dogs against rabies. Other preventive measures included capturing of stray dogs by health centers from the 1980s to the 2000s (called stray dog hunting) and culling^{1),5)}. As of 2016, health centers captured 35,535 dogs and 56,404 cats per year¹⁾. The number of dogs culled was 7,678 and that of cats was 30,757. This difference in numbers can be attributed to the decrease in stray dogs as a result of the measures. It is important to note that not all dogs put down have rabies. Stray dogs also include unowned dogs fed by people and dogs that are abandoned by their owners and are brought to health centers. Data on cats are available as there are cases where cats cannot be kept by their owners and are brought to health centers, even though the owner knows that the pet may be euthanized, and cases where cats are captured by citizens who consider them as menace⁹⁾. Pet dogs and cats that are lost are fed and protected at the health center for a certain period. If a new owner appears, they may be saved, but if they do not, they will be put down.

Second, when dogs are kept outdoors, they often flee their homes. As more dogs are kept indoors, it is less likely that these dogs will escape from their homes and end up as stray dogs⁵⁾. In the past, there were also cases where dogs, when terrified by the sound of thunder, have escaped after slipping out of their collars⁴⁾. Unfortunately, there is still the problem of owners abandoning their dogs for various reasons, and in some cases, dogs run away from their homes.

The third story is unique to free-ranging animals. Mating between a pet dog kept outdoors e.g. in the garden with a stray dog or between two stray dogs can result in unwanted litters⁵⁾. But as the number of stray dogs has decreased in recent years, the number of unwanted puppies born has decreased drastically. We think that the number of cats picked up and euthanized at health centers is much higher than that of dogs because of an increase in the number of stray cats¹⁾.

Fourth, owning a dog currently requires registering the pet with a health center or the municipality. In addition, pet dogs require vaccination against rabies once a year³⁾. Other conditions include using a leash for walking a dog on public roads and relatively higher costs than keeping cats¹⁾. Given these high costs of keeping a pet dog, we believe that the owners would unlikely abandon their dogs. However, these are not new conditions. Pets can be registered with the help of pet shops, while vaccination certificates and the use of leash may not always be checked. Therefore, we believe that these conditions do not discourage pet ownership⁶⁾.

Our study suggests that the number of stray dogs has decreased due to strong measures, such as the capture of stray dogs and mandatory registration of pet dogs. On the contrary, there has been no such decrease in the number of cats because similar measures have not been taken to manage the stray cat population. Although stray dogs are not the natural enemies of stray cats, they can sometimes attack cats. Our study suggests that the number of stray cats is likely to have increased due to the decrease in the number of stray dogs.

Measures to manage the number of stray cats

The number of stray dogs has decreased to the extent that they are rarely seen at present. As mentioned earlier, this seems to be largely due to people measures. One of the reasons why the number of cats is increasing is access to food³⁾. Animals require food for survival and growth. In

the case of wild cats, food may be a limiting factor and therefore their numbers are unlikely to grow. In contrast, stray cats have constant access to food as they are provisioned by people. This has led to an increase in their population as their survival is not threatened by the scarcity of food resources. Many animal lovers believe that they are feeding only a few animals and though they do not own these cats, they give them names and continue to feed them. However, this leads to an increase in the number of unwanted kittens born. This increase in numbers leads to competition for food as the amount of food available is limited. We do not know if it is common, but when a dog attacks a cat, the dog may kill the cat, but it does not eat it. In contrast, cats eat their offspring if they are starving. It may not be sustainable for a person to continue feeding all the cats³⁾, so they should not continue to feed, even if they are meowing endearingly and begging for food.

To control the population of stray cats, people should stop feeding them. In the recent years, an initiative called ‘communally owned cat’ was initiated in many Japanese cities. This is an approach to manage and care for a certain number of cats in an area and the people living in the area share the costs of food, sterilization surgery, and medical treatment⁶⁾. This approach ensures that a certain number of cats be maintained, but it may not work if some people continue to feed all cats that complain of hunger. However, if there are not many residents who support this approach, it will be difficult to sustain the costs, and there is a risk that these efforts will fail.

The Act on Welfare and Management of Animals was enacted in 1973³⁾. This law deals with the protection and management of animals. In addition to preventing animal abuse, it addresses issues concerning proper handling of animals, prevention of harm from animals to people, and prevention of menace from animals. However, there is ambiguity concerning interpretation of the law. For example, the law mandates protection of animals. This is usually interpreted as feeding of stray animals to ensure their survival³⁾. But the law also prescribes management of stray animals, which requires controlling their population while ensuring welfare of both animals and humans. In the case of stray dogs, prevention of rabies is a major goal; therefore, it may be interpreted that stringent measures to control dog population is necessary. However, cats are different from dogs because they do not carry such life-threatening illnesses. Wild cats are wild animals that can be caught or hunted if they destroy people’s homes or fields. But in the case of

stray cats, even if a house is damaged by a cat's spraying behavior, it is illegal to kill. However, it may be captured and sent to a health center. This is an ambiguous aspect of the law³⁾.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explain the possible reasons for the differences in the number of stray dogs and stray cats. We also showed that the number of stray cats was large, and what people could do to control the number. Our analyses showed that the number of stray dogs decreased because of the stringent measures to control the population of dogs and similar measures have not been taken to control the population of cats. Therefore, the population of cats remains high. Lack of responsible pet ownership such as when people abandon their pets has led to an increase in the number of stray animals⁴⁾. One of the fundamental measures to reduce the number of stray animals is a lifetime commitment on part of the owner to provide and care for the pet. To address this problem, collars that contain the owner's details are used frequently. But in recent years, implanting a subcutaneous microchip at the back of the pet's neck has been recommended¹⁰⁾. The microchip is a cylindrical electronic tag with a length of 8-12 mm and a diameter of approximately 2 mm, which lasts for nearly 30 years and does not need to be replaced during the life of the pet. The procedure is performed by a veterinarian at a clinic and costs approximately \$20 to \$100. Microchips can be implanted not just in dogs and cats but in hamsters as well. This helps in the quick identification of a lost pet regardless of the change in its appearance. However, as of 2011, only 7.8% of pets had microchips implanted in them¹⁰⁾. Reasons for such a low rate of implantation are perhaps due to the owner's perceived costs of the procedure and its effect on the pet, as well as the unwillingness to take responsibility for the pet's life. However, there are almost no disadvantages. The amended Act on Welfare and Management of Animals (amended in 2019) will make this procedure obligatory for pet owners and sellers to have their animals implanted with microchips¹⁰⁾. This will promote responsible pet ownership.

In addition, stray animals should not be provisioned by people. But, to tackle the problem of overpopulation as well as to ensure animal welfare, residents must take collective responsibility for these animals, including their food and medical treatment. To achieve this, it is necessary to manage it objectively without letting one's emotions or ego interfere. We suggest that people

should introspect about the importance to control stray animal populations and realize that overpopulation will cause great suffering to everybody including the animals.

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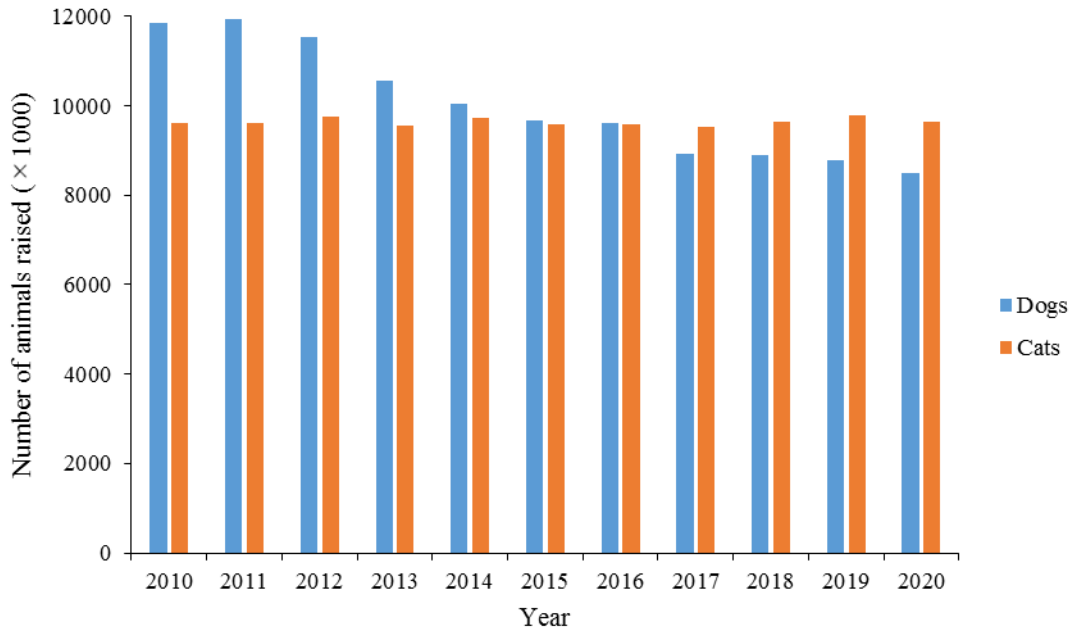


Fig. 1. Number of pet dogs and pet cats in Japan. (Estimates based on the data in reference 2).

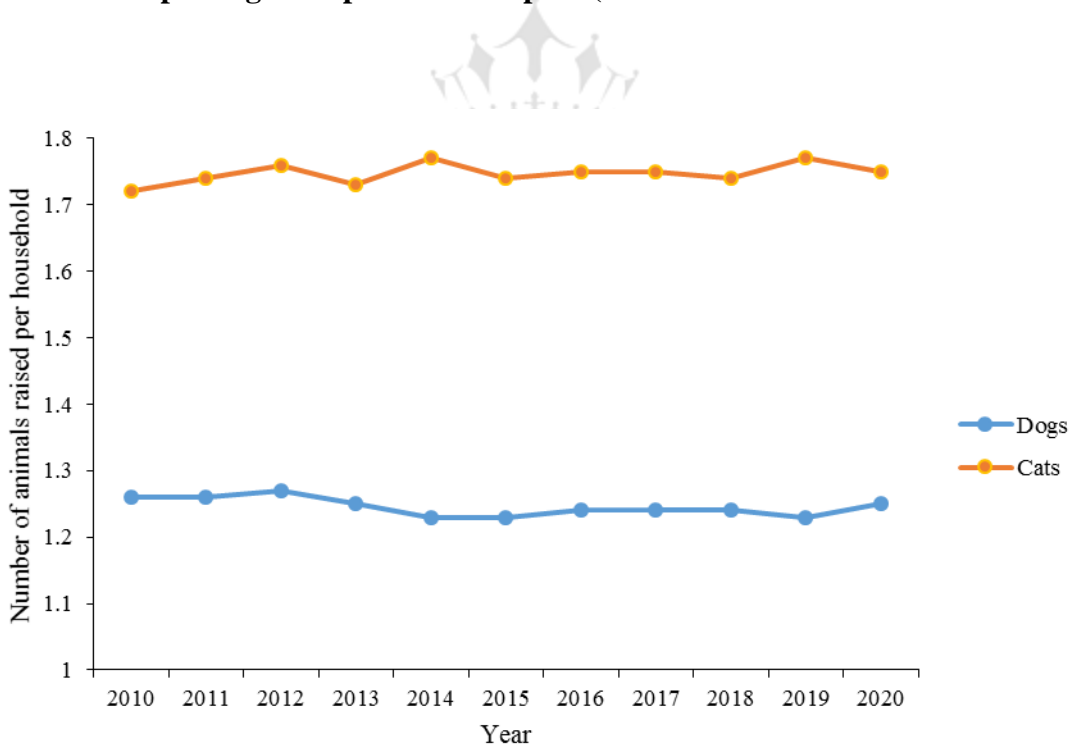


Fig. 2. Average number of pet dogs and pet cats per household (Estimates based on the data in reference 2).