

Should More People in Japan Get Hunting Licenses?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, damage to agricultural crops caused by wild animals has become increasingly noticeable in Japan. There has also been an increase in the number of wild animals entering residential areas and killing people and pets. To prevent damage caused by these wild animals, hunting is sometimes considered; however, Japan currently faces another problem: there are few people who are able to hunt. Data also show that this number has decreased in recent years. However, the number of birds and animals captured through hunting has increased. This study examines whether it would be better for more people to obtain hunting licenses or to avoid obtaining licenses and instead consider other means of reducing damage caused by wild animals.

Keywords: Hunting license, Wildlife damage, Crop damage, Bear, Killing or injuring people or pets

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, damage to crops caused by wild animals, such as bears, deer, wild boars, and monkeys, has become more noticeable in Japan. There has also been an increase in the number of bears and monkeys entering private homes and killing people and pets. There are several factors thought to cause this damage, including a) a decrease in the availability of nuts and plants near animals habitats due to climate change, such as global warming; b) increased contact with humans as animals search for food over a wide areas, resulting in greater overlap between humans and wild animals habitats; and c) the increasing tendency of wild animals to approach humans without fear because food is difficult to obtain naturally or because of improper waste disposal.

To prevent damage caused by wild animals such as bears, hunting is sometimes considered; however, Japan currently faces another problem: there are few people who are able to hunt¹). In Japan, only individuals with hunting licenses are permitted to hunt. A license is also required to use a tranquilizer gun. However, there are several obstacles to obtaining a license. For example, considerations include the cost of obtaining a license and concerns about whether applicants may be involved in gun-related crimes in future. Consequently, there number of hunters in Japan is relatively small. In the United States, there are 14 million hunters among a population of 330 million. This corresponds to 1.4 people/km² per land area. Applying these data to Japan, the number of hunters is 160,000 among a population of 130 million, or 0.4 people/km² of land area, which is low both in absolute numbers and in percentage terms²). Data also suggest that the number of hunters has declined in recent years (Figure 1). However, the number of birds and animals captured through hunting has increased (Figure 2). This study examines whether encouraging more people to obtain hunting licenses would be more effective, or whether alternative measures should be adopted to reduce damage caused by wild animals such as bears.

Why Japanese people should get a hunting license

There are several types of hunting, as listed in Table 1²). This article mainly discusses hunting using firearms. However, in practice, hunting methods vary widely and include the use of traps and nets. Generally, hunting is conducted either for leisure or to obtain resources such as meat and fur for livelihood. Some forms of hunting-related activities, such as clay pigeon shooting, involve shooting inanimate objects and do not involve animals. Harmful bird and animal capture is conducted to exterminate or capture animals that enter residential areas and pose a threat human. Whether an animal is considered harmful is determined not by individuals but by municipalities which hire hunters to conduct such operations. Animals are not always killed; in some cases, tranquilizer guns are used. However, regarding their subsequent handling, in most cases the animal is either transferred to a zoo or euthanized. This is because, even if animals are released back into the wild, they are believed to return to their original location and may again pose a threat to humans. Even when animals are transferred to zoos, considerable time and effort are required to acclimate animals that fear human and experience stressed in human environment. Compatibility with animals already housed in the zoo must

also be considered. Animals such as bears, deer, wild boars, and monkeys, whose population has increased in recent years or whose behavior has changed due to climate change, may be deterred by blank shots or killed using live ammunition. A similar practice is population control capture; however, this approach focuses less on preventing immediate damage, and more on reducing future risks to human caused by overpopulation or resource use of the captured animals. Population control captures may also be preceded by academic research activities, such as population surveys⁴).

Many of these activities are performed with the intention of benefiting human society or reducing economic and personal losses. For example, they may be used to obtain wild animal meat or to prevent human injuries from resulting from encounters with wild animals. To expand and maintain safe living spaces for humans, it is believed that controlling populations of animals considered harmful is necessary. A hunting license is required for these activities, and individuals may earn income by professionally hunting wild animals or controlling harmful animals at the request of the government. If hunting activities are conducted frequently and consistently for various purposes or government requests, it may be possible to earn a living solely through hunting⁵).

Although hunting is sometimes viewed merely as a means of killing wild animals, it may be considered more beneficial to humans when animal organs are used for meat or fur is used for ornamentation, rather than killing and burying animals without utilization. Even individuals who oppose killing animals may become more supportive if the carcasses are effectively used for various purposes. However, unlike livestock such as cows and pigs, there are currently no established standards for hygiene, safety, or meat processing procedures for captured wild animals⁶). Because humans do not control the gender, age, or diet of captured animals, the quality of their meat and fur is inconsistent. While some individuals may be valuable in terms of their taste or nutritionally, it is difficult claim this for all animals; therefore, it is virtually impossible to use all captured animals for meat, and significant variation in quality exists⁷).

Why it's not necessary/difficult to get a hunting license

As mentioned above, a hunting license is required to kill animals using firearms or to administer anesthetics. However, similar effects can be achieved without using firearms. Firecrackers or other deterrents can be used instead of blank shots; although their effective range is shorter, tranquilizers can also be administered using blowguns rather than a tranquilizer gun, a method sometimes used when transporting animals to zoos). Therefore, in some cases, it may not be necessary to obtain license.

It is generally believed that obtaining and maintaining a hunting license as well as continuing hunting activities, is extremely expensive⁸). In addition to licensing fee, individuals must purchase firearms such as rifles and invest in secure storage equipment, including locked storage system, to reduce the risk of theft. As municipalities typically request hunting associations to capture harmful birds and animals, individuals must remain members of the association to receive hunting requests^{1),9}). Maintaining membership in a hunting association also involves additional costs. Although this does not apply to all hunters, when hunting wild animals, one also requires additional equipment such as communication radios, vehicles, and fuel. The bounty offered by municipalities varies depending on the hunt but is typically around a few hundred dollars. This amount is not necessarily sufficient to cover expenses, and some hunters incur financial losses if they continue hunting⁸). As a result, the number of licensed “paper hunters” (hunters in name only who do not actively hunt) is said to be increasing⁵). It is almost impossible to cover living expenses through hunting alone, and many hunters in Japan engage in hunting as a side job, hobby, or volunteer activity.

There are also non-financial challenges associated with obtaining a hunting license. A hunting license cannot be obtained simply by completing a course; police conduct background checks on prospective license holders to assess potential risks and may consult local residents before granting approval. For subsistence hunting, strict restrictions are placed on periods during which each species must be hunt. If hunting were permitted year-round, excessive harvesting for profit could occur, leading to significant population declines. During harmful wildlife control, only designated individuals may be targeted, and DNA testing may be conducted when necessary. In population control captures, the number of animals that may be exterminated is strictly regulated and verified through carcass counts, with government compensation provided based on verified numbers.

Additionally, some individuals oppose culling from an animal welfare perspective¹⁰). It is difficult to euthanize animals instantly with a single shot, and because animals may struggle and suffer before dying, culling is often criticized as an act of animal cruelty than humane killing. Livestock are managed by humans and are regarded as economic resources; whereas wild animals are considered independent living beings that do not belong to humans. In recent bear attacks, residents in affected areas often demand the rapid capture or killing to ensure safety, whereas individuals who are not directly affected by the incident feel sympathy for the animals¹⁰). Individuals holding this view even if wild animals can be used for meat, doing so is unnecessary given the availability of livestock.

What should Japanese people do?

When considering the protection, maintenance, or expansion of human living spaces, it is unacceptable to allow wild animals to invade these areas and harm people or the livestock and crops they depend on. As a result, hunting licenses in Japan currently play a role in reducing wildlife populations through killing or capture. These measures are implemented solely to protect human interests and prevent harm. This situation from that of other countries, partly because Japan's limited land area and dense residential patterns make it easier for wild animals to invade human settlements, whereas residents are not able to protect themselves may lower vigilance. In other countries, people go on tourist tours that take them several days to see wild animals in places far from home, pay high fees to stay near feeding grounds to observe wild animals. Although this observation is limited, in many such cases there is a clear spatial separation between human living areas and wildlife habitats which differs significantly from the situation in Japan. In Japan, firearms are far less common in everyday life than in the United States, which may cause hunting to be perceived dangerous and extraordinary.

This raises the question of how hunting should be approached; however, hunting as a profession should be treated in the same way as farming or fishing, and therefore does not need to be abolished. Capture for academic research also has scientific value, particularly such as estimating wildlife population sizes. The main concern lies in harmful wildlife control and population control captures, which often prioritizes interests of people who believe that animals are harmful to them. Humans have cut down forests, displaced wild animals, and built houses and cultivated fields in their former habitats. While it is unrealistic to expect humans to confine themselves to avoid harm from animals, it may be necessary to explore ways to coexist, such as increasing separation between human and animal habitats, limiting further expansion of our own living spaces, or making certain concessions to wildlife. Even if capture is ultimately deemed necessary, careful and independent decision should be made regarding whether are kill or merely restrained. Decision regarding hunting should be made through careful planning, with consideration given to the potential life or death outcomes for the animals involves. Moreover, if human and animal habitats could be separated with walls, fences, or deterrents like odors and sounds that animals dislike, hunting might not be necessary¹⁾.

From human perspectives, it is often argued that wild animals must be controlled because their numbers are too high; however, it is necessary to question whether humans' assessment accurately reflects natural ecological balances. As some experts have noted, animal populations in areas with minimal human involvement may be naturally balanced, and these levels may differ from human expectations. It is also possible that humans-generated waste attracts wildlife by providing high-calorie food sources, or that inadequate forest management creates condition for animals to hide and reproduce, resulting in inflated population levels. Therefore, this issue should be examined more objectively, with humans viewed as one species among many on Earth rather than as the central subject.

CONCLUSION

In recent years Japan has witnessed numerous cases of damage to human habitation caused by bears and other wild animals, prompting widespread discussion about whether increasing the number of licensed hunters would be beneficial. Affected residents have suffered serious losses, including the destruction of farmland that eliminates sources of income and the injury or death of family members and pets. However, residents of areas that are not affected by wild animals sometimes argue that killing animals or reducing their population is cruel. This position reflects a more moral perspective that differs from judgments about acts such as killing or injuring other people or stealing crops. The distinction arises because wild animals may cause harm while attempting to protect their own lives or those of their offspring, driven by survival instinct. In such cases, careful consideration is required to determine whether killing the animal responsible is the most appropriate response. This problem may be solved by improving preventive measures that reduce contact between humans and wild animals before conflict occur. As hunting is ultimately a means of capturing or killing wild animals, decisions about increasing the number of licensed hunters should be based on clear assessment of how wild animals should be managed and the extent to which hunting is necessary. If, after such assessment, wildlife culling is still deemed necessary, then making effective use of carcasses for meat or other purposes would help ensure that animal lives are not wasted and may increase public acceptance. At present, it is difficult to use all wild animal meat for human consumption because of quality issues; therefore, a key challenge is to explore alternative uses such as processing it into pet food or compost, to increase utilization and prevent waste.

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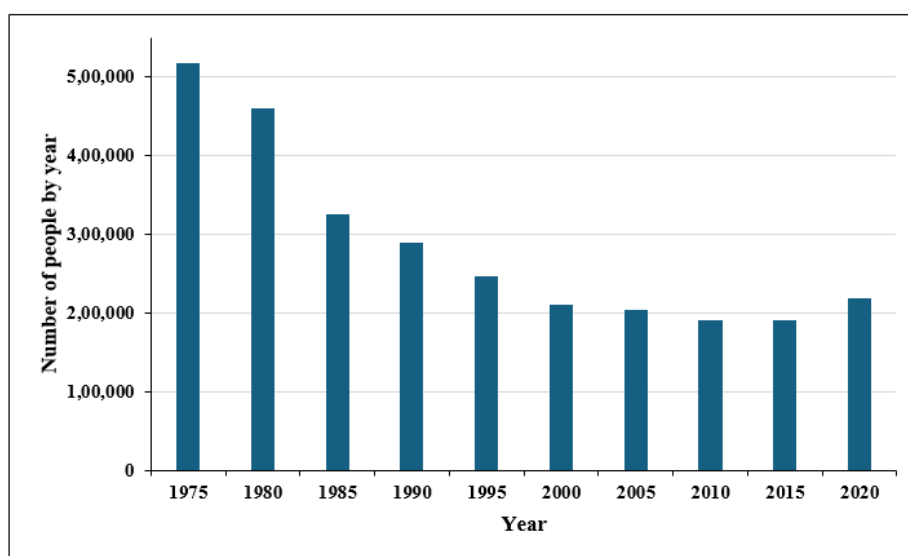


Figure 1. Changes in the number of people holding hunting licenses in Japan

Source: Based on data from references 3) and 4).

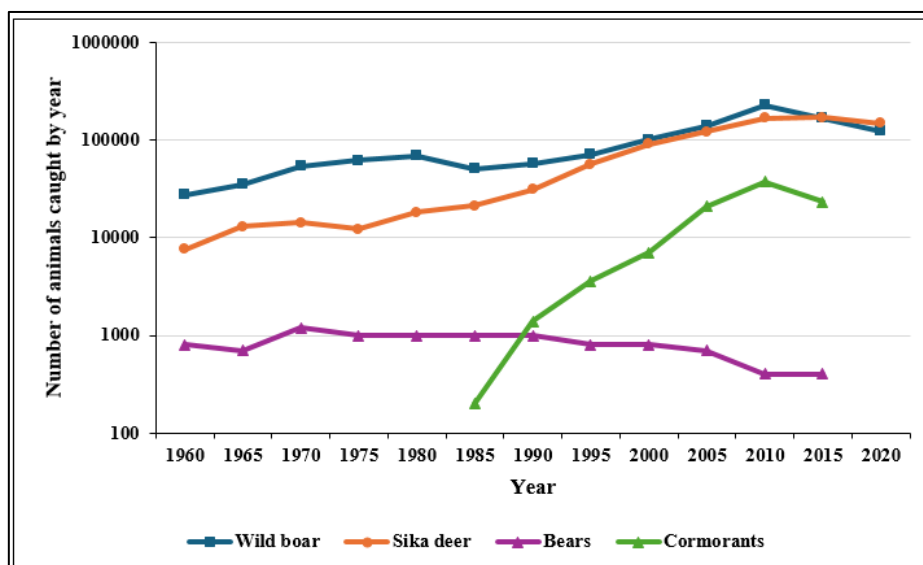


Figure 2. Number of major birds and animal species captured through hunting in Japan

Source: Based on data from reference 4).

Table 1 Types of hunting purposes

Types of Hunting	Definitions	Permissions	Explanation
Hunting	Personal recreational or professional hunting, which requires a hunting license and hunting registration.	Prefectural governments grant permission and manage the project.	This includes hunting practiced as a traditional occupation in rural areas. The main purpose is to obtain meat for personal consumption at the hunter's <u>personal request</u> . This category also includes sniping animals and inanimate objects as a hobby.
Capturing harmful birds and animals	Hunting permitted for damage control purposes.	Cities, towns, and villages (in most areas) grant permission and manage the project.	Measures taken to address bear attacks, which have become more frequent in recent years, fall into this category. These measures are implemented when deemed necessary by the <u>government</u> .
Capturing for population control	Emergency hunting of overpopulated species.	<u>Prefectures</u> create plans and implement projects based on those plans.	This is carried out in a planned manner to control populations of wild animals such as deer and wild boars.
Capturing for academic research	Hunting permitted for research purposes.	Prefectures review, grant permission, and manage the project.	This is done for research and study purposes by <u>university professors, local government officials, etc.</u> It may also be used to record the population size before capturing animals for population control. Sometimes, the license holder is the applicant themselves, particularly when they are the research organizer.

Note: Underlined part indicates who intends to hunt.

Source: Based on data from reference 2).



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