

Finding Ways to Mediate the Predicament of Japan's Bears

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

“DEEP in the mountains the bears gathered in great numbers and the snow blew like needles.” Such is the depiction of fantastic snow scenery in a novel by Izumi Kyoka, a writer of the Meiji period of Japan. To the Japanese of this earlier period, bears were wild animals who lived deep in the mountains and were rarely seen. In 2004 however, frequent encounters between bears and human beings occurred.

Bears have come into houses and have broke into schools and nursing homes. Almost every day the newspapers reported villainies somewhere by an Asiatic black bear, that dwells in every district of Japan, with the exception of Hokkaido. There had been over 100 cases of injury or death caused by these bears, and the Democratic Party of Japan, the leading opposition party, has even formed a working group to investigate the damage caused by bears. A high-tech equipment has been developed that can detect the approach of a bear at 100m and drive it away with flashing lights and the sound of gunshots.

One Sunday in Hiroshima prefecture, a young employee of a resin manufacturer dropped by his office to pick up something he had left behind and was surprised to find a bear in the office. He was bitten on the face and suffered serious injuries. In an apple orchard open to tourists in Hyogo prefecture, five or six bears appeared every night. There are 1,800 apple trees but almost all the fruit have been devoured or destroyed, so that the owners had been forced to shut down the orchard during the season.

In the same prefecture a farmer, aged 68, heard sounds near the kitchen door and when he opened the door he found a bear. Without waiting for an invitation, the bear walked right in and fell asleep in the hallway. The bear, which was later captured, was 1.3m long and was an emaciated 47.5kg.

In another location a bear was shot dead and investigators found that its stomach contained only one-third the usual amount of food. One reason for this “group descent from the mountains” may well be because there had been a large number of typhoons last year and the bears were starving because all the acorns were blown down.

Yet there is a more fundamental problem. Because imported lumber has become so popular, making domestically produced lumber almost impossible to market, cultivated forests are being abandoned

and left to return to the wild. Wild animals are on the increase. Woodlands close to populated areas where local residents used to go to make charcoal and gather firewood were once a kind of “demilitarized zone” dividing the human and the bear domains. However, the population of these districts has plunged rapidly and now there are only a few elderly residents scattered here and there. The woodlands which people used to enter on occasion have fallen into disuse, and bears are crossing over that boundary and coming closer to the human domain. Agricultural produce left in the fields and raw garbage also draws animals.

In order to solve financial difficulties, the Japanese government has recommended the merger of cities, towns and villages, aiming for a reduction of the current 3,200 entities to a total of 1,000. The administrative net which is supposed to take care of rural areas has grown less attentive and there is a possibility that these mountain hamlets will become even less prosperous. This further improves the conditions that bring bears into the human domain.

The Kobe Shimbun, a newspaper in Hyogo prefecture, commented in an editorial that the collision between bears and humans is due in large part to humans letting mountainous areas fall into disuse. It concluded that we ought to pay attention to the bears’ unspoken appeal to regenerate the mountainous regions, which comprise some 90% of the nation’s land area.

A movement has also sprung up to alleviate the bears’ predicament. Nature protection groups have commenced an “acorn

gift” movement to both protect the bears and discourage them from the human settlements. As a result of a nationwide appeal for acorns, the group’s phone rang off the hook and they gathered four tons of the treats. Members of the group took the acorns into the mountains and left the goodwill offering for the bears.

The group’s leader commented, “We hope that those who donated these acorns will take this occasion to get involved in restoring the forests and help hammer out fundamental policies for protecting nature.”

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Illustration: Kato Susumu



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