

## Stray seal reveals Japan's disquiet

AFP, Tokyo

A seal that strayed from the frozen north to take up incongruous residence in rivers near Tokyo has acquired a huge following that reveals more about social and environmental problems here than the natural history of the animal itself.

Tama-chan, a tawny-coated bearded seal of about nine months, first turned up in the river after which it is named -- the Tama -- last August, and has since relocated to the Katabira River running through a heavily-industrialised part of Yokohama just west of the capital.

With its moustache of whiskers and big, round brown eyes, the seal quickly became a media phenomenon and was a hit with a public that has a love of all things "kawaii" or cute.

For about two months local residents and schoolchildren, mostly women and girls, were in the grip of Tama-chan fever, turning up in their hundreds, squealing and applauding at every appearance of the seal.

Savvy hawkers started selling Tama-chan T-shirts and ice-cream vendors set up their stalls nearby. One local baker produced a seal-shaped cake and was reportedly selling 100 a day.

At the end of the year, Tama-chan featured among the 10 most popular and commonly used terms of the year, and three CDs of songs extolling the seal pup were on sale.

Things have quietened down somewhat since the seal has settled in the Katabira, but a daily routine has been established by the seal's self-appointed guardians.

From dawn every morning five or six members of the "Tama-chan o mamoru-kai" (protection association) are on the lookout for the seal, which is now about 1.5 metres long, and weighs an estimated 110 kilograms.

"This morning we saw him at 6.30, but I reckon he's been here since 1:00 am because he only comes up (on the cemented river bank), when the water level is high enough because of the tide," Chiaki Fujita, a spokesman for the 150-strong group, told AFP on a recent Tama-chan watch.

Yukio Akatsuka, a university professor and social critic, is appalled by reaction to the seal.

"First it got picked up by the media, then by the business. Tama-chan is so-called entertainment similar to the ones appearing in festivals and markets," he said.

"People go there to see Tama-chan in the same way we pay to see animals in zoo... They don't charge to see Tama-chan so instead there are people who have started to sell products."

Akatsuka contrasted the behaviour of the Japanese with that in Britain when wayward sea creatures turned up in the River Thames.

"I did not hear about people trying to earn money out of the creature but only about their concerns on how to protect or save it," he said.

Amid all the media frenzy, there was precious little discussion of why

a seal whose natural habitat is the Arctic Ocean washed up in temperate -- in summer almost tropical -- waters, and if there is any link to global warming and the melting of the polar icecaps.

"The media concentrated on Tama-chan because it is cute and not on other environmental issues, like the dams," and widespread use of concrete on the rivers it has visited, said Yasuo Tanaka, 72, who founded the seal's protection association in November.

But as Tama-chan fever died down, there was a noticeable change in behaviour on the part of the local authorities and ordinary people, Tanaka said.

"The issue of the environment has started to attract more attention. Some people say Tama-chan has taught them there is a danger: they recognise the seal came because of climate change."

The river has become cleaner as the local government started to make more of an effort to clean it, and fewer people were throwing rubbish into it, Tanaka added.

The seal's presence has also helped forge a bond among people that was not there before, as the association's members meet regularly to exchange information or hold exhibitions related to Tama-chan.

Piano teacher Tomoko Genkawa, 48, has been visiting her new furry friend twice a day since October.

"I first got interested in Tama-chan because I found it very cute. I started coming everyday and I found it more interesting to study its facial expressions... then I started to be curious about its physical conditions," she said.

Genkawa claims the little seal changed her life after the death of her brother-in-law in November.

"My husband and (I) were both very depressed. Because of Tama-chan our life has brightened up. It gave us the courage and energy to bear our life."

Tanaka said that three people suffering from "hikikomori" (voluntary isolation from family and society, usually inside the sufferer's bedroom, a condition affecting more than one million Japanese), "have recovered, thanks to Tama-chan."

"They heard about Tama-chan through the Internet and on TV. They started coming and three months later their behaviour has changed, they communicate with the rest of us," he said.

One thing everyone -- experts, the authorities and Tama-chan fans -- are agreed on is that there is no question of taking forcibly the seal back to its Arctic home.

But, driven by the urge to mate, the day will undoubtedly come for Tama-chan to return when it gets to four or five years of age if not before, and when it does, Tanaka fears the end of everything the seal's presence spawned.

"Some people say we still should meet but it may be very difficult, association could fade away," he said.

## ENVIRONMENT WATCH

### Chinese poachers poison Russian rivers: WWF

AFP, VLADIVOSTOK, Russia

Chinese poachers and residents in Russia's far east are poisoning rivers and lakes in their hunt for frogs to sell on the black market, the WWF ecology group said yesterday.

"There is practically no river in the southern Primorye region which has escaped their attention. It's ecological terrorism," the wildlife group said.

The poachers have poured gallons of pesticide into the Usuriysk region this winter and several people have been poisoned, as well as the flora and fauna.

Some poachers prefer to electrocute their prey. The frogs sell for a dollar each on the black market. Their livers are used in traditional Chinese medicines and beauty products.

### Rusting Prestige ups risk of more oil spill

REUTERS, Madrid

Thousands more tonnes of toxic fuel will eventually spill from the wreck of the sunken oil tanker Prestige off the Spanish coast as the ship's hull rusts, according to a report published on January 28.

The Prestige sank in mid-November, spewing thousands of tonnes of toxic sludge over Spain's northwestern coastline. Since then the fractured hull of the tanker has continued slowly to leak fuel oil in the nation's worst environmental disaster.

The report said corrosion would mean the complete disintegration of the tanker over a period of up to 40 years. More than 50,000 tonnes of oil are estimated to be still inside the sunken ship's tanks.

"We can conclude that, even if the holes were completely sealed, structural deterioration (means that)... the leakage of oil from the tanks cannot be avoided," a committee from Spain's Scientific Investigation Center concluded.

The French mini-submarine Nautilus has been patching up cracks and collecting snakes of leaking oil in buckets from the hull since late December. However, Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said on January 28 that scientists hoped to provide a definitive solution to the problem of the Prestige soon.

"In the first fortnight of February, (scientists) will tell us what the definitive solution is, and it can be carried out in the summer," Rajoy told Tele Cinco television.

Thick, tar-like oil has been leaking from the Prestige and washing up on beaches over a large area of northern Spain and on stretches of France's Atlantic coast since the 26-year-old tanker sank, devastating some of Spain's prime fishing grounds.

Holes in the wreck's hull are being sealed in an attempt to keep the remaining oil in place until some kind of permanent solution can be found.

### Smog over Beijing

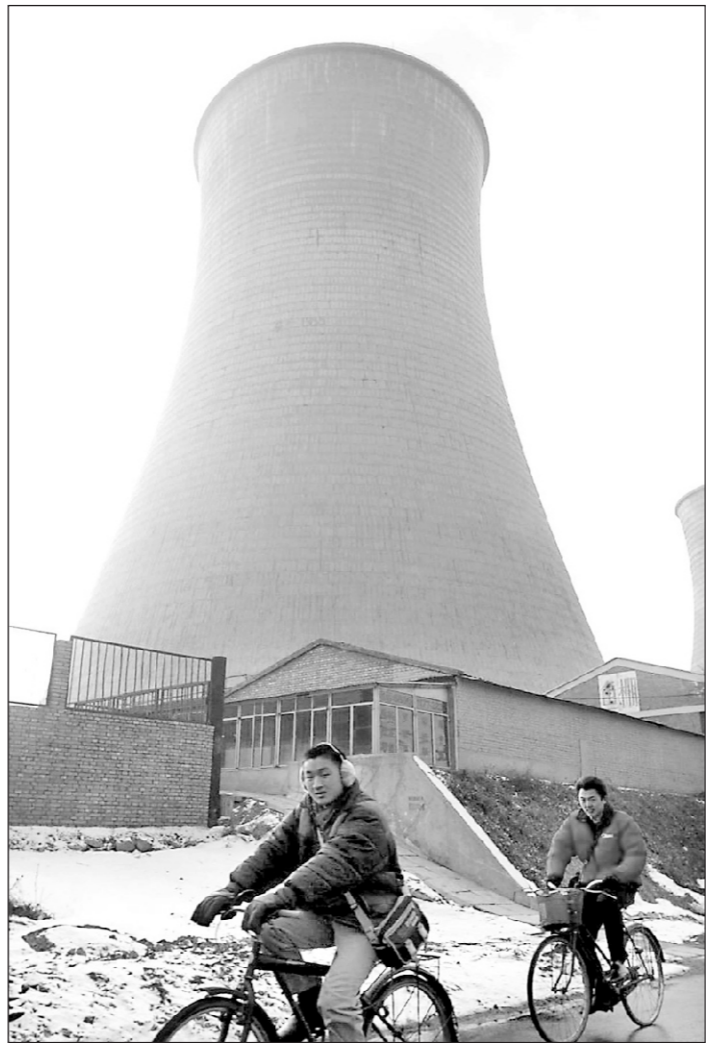


PHOTO: AFP

Cyclists pass by the large cooling towers of a state-owned steel mill in Beijing. A leading United Nations agency has recently urged the Chinese government to take tough economic-based measures to curb urban air pollution, saying Chinese cities remained some of the most smog-bound in the world, often with pollutant concentrations at multiples of the levels considered safe for human health and the environment.

# Afghanistan on the brink of a natural disaster

UNEP study traces effects of decades of conflict

AFP, Kabul

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have left the country on the brink of natural disaster which will spiral out of control unless urgent action is taken, a United Nations study released Wednesday said.

Overflowing rubbish dumps, poisonous medical waste facilities, foetid open sewers, fume-belching factories and leaking oil refineries are adding to the devastating effects of deforestation and desertification, the report said.

In the first full assessment of the country since the 2001 collapse of the hardline Taliban regime ended 23 years of war, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) study called for international aid to prevent further destruction.

"Tragically the combined pressures of warfare, civil disorder, lack of governance and drought have taken a major toll on Afghanistan's natural and human resources," the report said.

"The significant lack of effective environmental management and the extensive environmental damage and degradation... is increasing human vulnerability to natural disasters."

Unless immediate steps are taken, both by Afghanistan's new government and the global community, its population and precious wildlife will be poisoned and starved out of existence, the internationally-funded study said.

"Transforming Afghanistan into a prosperous, democratic and self-sustaining country cannot be achieved without the assistance of the international community," it said.

Years of fighting and drought have left the central Asian country heavily dependent on foreign help for reconstruction, a process which the UNEP said will flounder unless environmental concerns are addressed.

"Conflict has... destroyed infrastructure and hindered agricultural activities."

"These effects coupled with three to four years of drought affecting most of the country have caused serious and widespread land degrada-



PHOTO: AFP

A barren present and a bleak future

tion, including lowered water tables, desiccation of wetlands, deforestation and widespread loss of vegetative cover, erosion and loss of wildlife populations.

"These problems are compounded by the increasing numbers of people who are displaced due to insecurity arising from degraded environments and loss of livelihoods."

Afghanistan's major population centres have been placed under immense pressure in recent months as people fleeing rural hardships join a large proportion of some 1.8 million refugees returning from exile.

"High levels of unemployment, a failing electricity supply network and assorted public health problems are having a profound effect on the

quality of urban Afghanistan," the survey added.

Of major concern in the cities is the pollution of the water table by disease-laden raw sewage and industrial waste. Some 580,000 and rising vehicles running on low-grade diesel are also choking an atmosphere already blighted by dust and toxic fires.

Arid rural areas have also been hit hard by deforestation and bad farming practices, devastating the landscape and threatening a wildlife population already hit by extensive hunting.

The report singled out Pakistan as having a major role to play in cutting off smuggling routes for timber illegally harvested from eastern Afghanistan's once rich conifer forests.

Over 50 percent of forest cover has been lost over the past two decades in the eastern provinces of Nuristan, Kunar and Nangarhar, the study said, with similar losses predicted for southeastern Khost, Paktia and Paktika.

Afghan Environment Minister Yusuf Nooristani said deforestation was one of the main causes of the country's ecological woes.

"The country has been robbed of its precious forest resources by Afghan and non-Afghan timber mafia and smugglers," said Nooristani.

"The net result of the degradation is widespread desertification and erosion and increased vulnerability to environmental disasters."