

Turtles in Ecological Danger

Wakayama National College of Technology

Chika Yamamoto

Have you ever kept a pet? When I was a child, my family kept a kind of turtle called *midorigame*. It was our pleasure to see the *midorigame* growing up. It became a member of my family. But one day, a television program reported that many owners were throwing away their turtles. I could not believe it. I studied how turtles live. Then I learned that the ecosystems of not only turtles but also many other animals are endangered by selfish owners. Now nature is threatened by human beings.

The black bass is a typical example of the ecosystem being threatened. First introduced in 1925 in a river in Kanagawa Prefecture for food and fishing, black bass had only lived in five prefectures until 1964. Due to a fishing boom, however, millions of them were illegally and irresponsibly planted in rivers all over Japan. As a result, their habitat spread to 40 prefectures in 1979. Since they have strong propagating power and a disposition to eat other fish, black bass eat indigenous species like *ayu*, or sweetfish and so on. Thus, as foreign species have increased, old species are extinct or in danger of extinction in a lot of rivers and lakes today.

Similar things have happened to turtles. It's believed *midorigame* are endemic, or native to Japan, but actually they are from the southeastern part of North America. Its original name is the Mississippi red-eared slider. The sliders are popular as pets because of their distinctive red marks around the tails of their eyes. However, as they grow up, the red marks become indistinct. Also, although they are only three to five centimeters at birth, they grow larger and larger up to 35 centimeters long. When the turtles grow so big, people throw away their *midorigame*. They say, "I didn't know that they would grow so big," "They are not cute any more," or "I'm tired of them." Aren't these owners selfish? Do you think they really care for their turtles?

What was worse, it was reported around 1975 that *midorigame* carry salmonella bacteria benignly in their digestive system. To be sure, humans can become sick from salmonella but there is no danger if only we wash our hands after handling turtles. However, people did not know this. Affected by the TV news and afraid

of the turtles, many owners easily threw their turtles away.

After they are thrown away, *midorigame* quickly reproduce themselves, since they are very adaptable to the surrounding environment. Now we can see a lot of *midorigame* in the wild. But the turtles are aggressive enough to attack other kinds of turtles. As a result, such indigenous species as *kusagame*, Reeve's pond turtle, or *ishigame*, Japanese pond turtle, are endangered by the increase of *midorigame*.

What do you think of the situation? You may just feel pity for *kusagame* and *ishigame*. But ecological disruption is a serious matter. If one species becomes extinct, some other species will increase extraordinarily, and then the whole ecological balance will be disturbed. Once an ecosystem is destroyed, it can hardly be restored. Such ecological destruction will surely have a harmful effect on us human beings.

Then what should we do? First, we should have an accurate knowledge of our pets. Second, we should be responsible for our pets. Above all, we must love our pets. If we love them, we should learn more about how the animals live. If we love them, we should keep the animals, or live with them, for all their lives. These attitudes will eventually help prevent ecological disasters.

Pets are not your toys! They are living creatures. Your careless behavior might trigger a disruption of the ecosystem. You can have a pet, but please keep your pets with care and responsibility until they die!!