

# Perspectives on Deer in Contemporary Japan

## *Chelsey Wong*

*Abstract:* Deer have been seen in a variety of ways during their long history of coexistence with humans in Japan. The relationship between deer and Japanese society has been complicated and the various identities deer have assumed for the Japanese people have sometimes been both profound and, simultaneously, dualistic, ranging from the idea of deer as sacred animals to their role as prey, to their use as a cute symbol, to their perception as vermin. This paper examines a recent marked shift in the image of deer at a national level in Japan. The image of deer is now moving from the varied but co-existing identities mentioned above towards a strongly negative one. The paper examines publications by botanists that have emphasized the perceived threat deer pose not only to their traditional enemies – farmers – but also to the whole ecosystem they currently inhabit. It also looks at publications released by the Japanese government that have tended to encourage a national trend towards the consumption of *jibie*, deer meat, as a means of both protecting the ecosystem and helping rural economies. The paper also demonstrates the way in which this particular solution to the “deer problem,” and the concomitant perception of deer as vermin, has been increasingly taken up by mass media in recent years in preference to other solutions, leading to a perception among the Japanese public that eating deer is in some way connected with protecting the ecosystem.

*Keywords:* Deer, ecology, wildlife management, vermin, *jibie*.

### Background

There is a widely popular, albeit increasingly challenged, concept of “the Japanese attitude to nature,” which posits a peculiarly sympathetic attitude towards, and peculiarly harmonious relationship with, nature as historically characteristic of Japanese culture.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the history of the relationship between humans and wildlife within Japan is as full of variety and contradiction as the history of this same relationship in any other culture. Deer, for example, have been viewed in Japan as both symbolic of – and even incarnating – divinity, as foodstuff, as precious fellow life, as partaking of that animal nature that can be contrasted to everything that is valuable about the human, as objects of

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<sup>1</sup> For particularly forceful examples of the challenge to “the Japanese attitude to nature,” see Kellert (1991; 1993) and Kalland.

aesthetic appreciation, and as pests. Moreover, as elsewhere in the world, they have also often been viewed in these apparently contradictory ways simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> This should be unsurprising, since, for any human society, nature is always both a practical resource and the occasion for symbolic projection. Thus, it should not surprise us that, while the deer in Nara have been a government-designated Natural Monument since 1957, deer in Kagawa are used as an ingredient in dog food (*Asahi shinbun* 2017), any more than it should surprise us to see a British child sitting down to a plate of pork sausages, or a Chinese child to a plate of *zhēng ròu bǐng*, just after watching an episode of *Peppa Pig*. Neither is this a matter of either Westernisation or modernity. As Long points out, the same eighth-century Buddhist-influenced emperors that issued injunctions against slaughtering animals continued the tradition of accepting deer meat as tribute (Long 42-43). Deer might appear as supernatural in literature, and might be kept by various shrines, but venison was also an ingredient in traditional Japanese cuisine, not only in rural areas but also, right up to the nineteenth century, in urban areas too (Cwierka 24-29; Nakazawa).<sup>3</sup>

With the decline of the eating of game and an increase in the consumption of beef and other meat in Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the association between deer and food weakened (Cwierka 24-34; Noma; Wong). Arguably, for the greater part of the population – always excluding farmers and hunters – deer took on a more predominantly aesthetic, symbolic, or sentimental role, particularly in the twentieth century. The “character” promoting tourism in Nara became, and still is, a deer, as is the mascot, Sikacchi, of the ice hockey team Ice Bucks. (Indeed, the deer themselves at Nara have even been taught to perform a little show: to come to the sound of a bugle (Tanaka 44).) One could also think of

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<sup>2</sup> For a short historical overview of the diverse attitudes towards animals in general in Japanese culture see Ambros (17-50); for the specific connection between deer and religion see Long (passim).

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the Kasuga-taisha in Nara, for instance, Kanda Shrine in Tokyo and Katori Shrine in Katori kept deer in the past (*Chiba nippō*; Kishikawa). Deer were also traditionally a source of pharmaceuticals; see Nakazawa (passim).

the *shishigami* in Miyazaki Hiyao's *Momonoke Hime* (1997).<sup>4</sup> Deer against a forest background, rather as moss-covered ancient trees within the forest itself, have become, for a Japanese audience at least, a kind of shorthand for the “Japaneseness” of the landscape that is being portrayed.

In describing the way in which government and media in Japan have, in recent years, increasingly promoted the view of deer as pests, I am not, then, claiming that this represents a falling away from some monolithic premodern, more harmonious or spiritual, perception of deer, nor that it represents the emergence of a phenomenon fundamentally in conflict with “the Japanese attitude to nature.” Rather, my point is that the deliberate promotion of this view of deer – arguably always the view of Japanese farmers who had to share the land with them – at a national level represents an impoverishment of what was previously a rich diversity, a narrowing down of the dominant perception of this particular animal to a strictly utilitarian point of view. For, as we shall see, deer have recently come to be seen in highly negative terms in Japan, and blamed for their effect on both the human social space and the natural environment. The damage they are perceived to cause to humans and to nature has led deer to be labeled “vermin” (*chōjū higai*), a term that can now be commonly found in connection with deer in news articles in mainstream media, together with an emphasis on the damage they cause in terms of losses to farming and business, as well as the disturbance and grazing damage they cause in the mountains. (Overpopulation is invariably cited as the cause of these problems, albeit that attention is rarely paid to the reasons for the deer's increasingly limited habitat.)

That this trend in the general perception of deer is of relatively recent origin can be seen from an examination of the coverage of deer in print media since 1945. In fact,

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<sup>4</sup> Although this forest spirit is a composite of elements from various animals, the predominant impression it gives is stag-like.

newspaper articles about deer from 1945 to 1989 are relatively rare. (Related search results from the *Yomiuri* are 178 articles, from the *Mainichi* 216, and from the *Asahi* 528.<sup>5</sup>) However, the different episodes that prompted the articles show the complicated and various perceptions of deer during this period. For example, an article in the *Yomiuri* on December 24, 1949, introducing fashionable deer skin gloves, clearly expresses an instrumental approach to the animal. In the 1950s, while the government was making an effort to plant trees in the mountains, it decided to reduce the number of deer in order to protect the young trees. However, at this time the media still did not directly associate the animals with harm, but rather presented them as a pure Japanese species that should be protected (*Yomiuri shinbun* 1958). In the 1960s, a report discussed the population of deer increasing and becoming hard to manage; tourists were injured through misunderstanding the habits of deer in Nara (*Asahi shinbun* 1964). The report pointed out the human responsibility and emphasized how deer are the symbol of Nara. However, the farmers' view of deer as competitors and threats to their livelihood is also represented in this period. In fact, one article directly argued that we should protect the farmers rather than protect the deer (Watanabe Taketō). "The deer, which have a cute appearance but are a 'wild gang' like wild rabbits, weasels, etc, are protected by the Wildlife Protection Law and have prospered... Where there is a law protecting the deer, it is deeply contradictory that there is no law to manage the deer, and no solution to the problem of this nuisance."<sup>6</sup> At the end of the article, Watanabe emphasized that "we should set up a specific area for deer, which would exist for tourism and adoration, for instance, a zoo."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The reason that *Asahi*'s result is double and triple the other two newspapers is that only three "conditional words" (NOT) are allowed in the search engine of the paper version.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. The original text is: 「見た目には可愛いが、野ウサギやイタチなどと同じように野生のギャングであるシカが、鳥獣保護法という法律に守られて繁殖するばかりだという...シカを保護する法律はあっても、シカを管理し、被害の対策を考慮してくれる法律がないのは矛盾も甚だしい。」

<sup>7</sup> My translation. The original text is 「ただ観光や愛がんのためのシカなら、動物園なり特定の場所に一定すべきだ。」

There were two lawsuits over the damage caused by deer, one in 1979, in which the farmers sued the Kasuga-taisha and the Foundation for the Protection of Deer in Nara and one in 1981, in which the farmers sued the same parties and, in addition, the Nara prefecture and Japanese national government (Tanaka 154-155). Both lawsuits referred to deer as “vermin.” However, even though the farmers won the first lawsuit and there was a reconciliation for the second, the newspapers did not widely refer to deer as vermin, nor did they refer to the harm the deer caused. Rather, the deer were described as victims of the poor management of the Japanese government: “Because of the irresponsibility of government, deer are crying” (*Yomiuri shinbun* 1983).<sup>8</sup>

The deer in Nara have been regarded as “free-ranging” animals (Watanabe Shinichi 109). In fact, the deer are partly tamed, but at the same time they are considered wild, which suggests those “conflicting” feelings about deer in Japanese society described above. The Japanese public in general have had the chance to closely encounter wild animals since the first official contemporary zoo was opened in 1882 in Tokyo, with further zoos opening in Osaka, Kyoto and Nagoya in the early 1900s (Mizoi 189-193). From the 1940s to the 1980s, we can see that, even though there was occasional conflict between humans and deer, the way in which the media portrayed deer was still nuanced and diverse. However, since the 1980s the focus has dramatically changed; negative expressions such as “harm” and “vermin” started to occur in a significantly wide coverage and in relatively numerous instances.

Diagram 1 shows the number of articles found in three major newspapers between 1945 and 2017 that describe deer as vermin or associate them with vermin.<sup>9</sup> We can see that such

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<sup>8</sup> My translation. The original text is 「シカが泣いている、無責任行政の狭間で」。

<sup>9</sup> In calculating the frequency of the description of deer as vermin in Japanese, the author has followed the following procedure: reading the journal articles to accumulate useful keywords and relevant expressions, condensing the results into several Japanese keywords and inputting these into news articles search engines to get the number of articles containing such descriptions. In order to avoid irrelevant articles, the author also put “conditional words” (NOT) into the search engines. The numbers are the sum of all articles for each keyword. Where they may have been duplication - when an article mentioned more than one of the keywords - the number of articles is still based on the search result for each keyword. At the same time, due to the limitation of

descriptions appear mainly since the late 1980s and have increased dramatically since the 1990s.

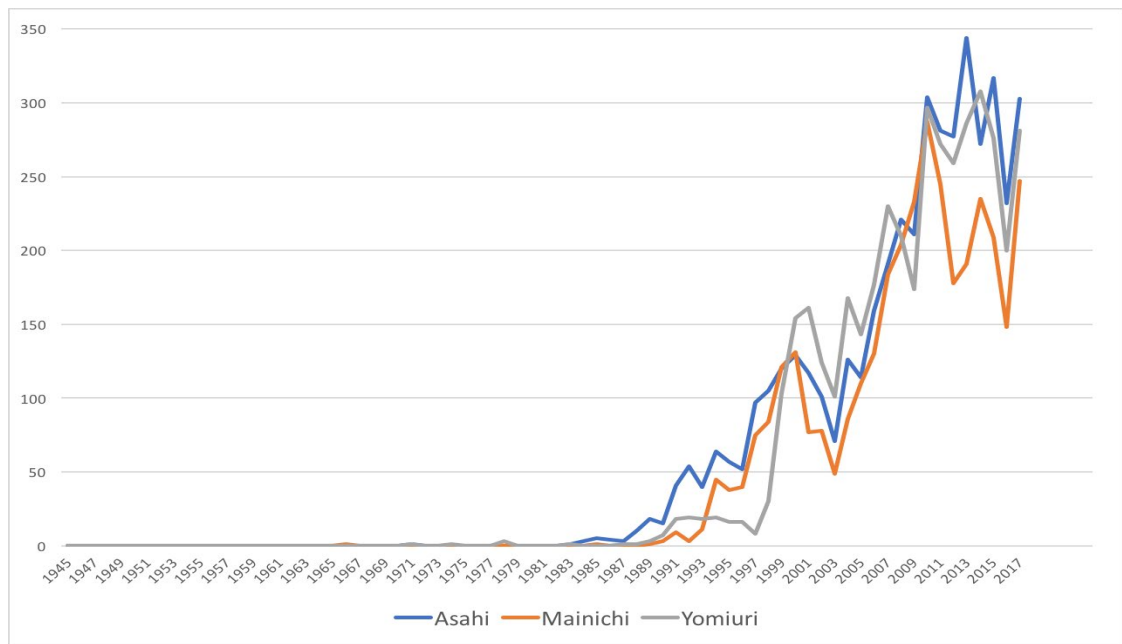


Diagram 1 Indication of how Japanese main journal media focus on damage by deer

In the next section, we examine in more detail the background of this dramatic change in the perception of deer in Japan: the way in which deer have gone from being simply the enemies of farmers to being perceived as a threat to the whole mountain ecosystem.

### Deer as Vermin

While deer in modern Japan have a strong image of belonging to the mountains, they are actually a species that normally inhabits flat areas, meadows and the peripheries of mountains (Okumura 34). They have come to live in secluded mountain areas and forage on a variety of vegetation, having partly adapted to the environment of *satochi satoyama*, the human environment created through a lifestyle relying on sustainable natural resources – even if they

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words that the search engines deal with, there are still some irrelevant articles found during the search. However, this diagram still provides an indication of how Japanese media has focused on the damage caused by deer.

did so principally as competitors for these resources. However, they have failed to survive in the new, artificially created forests (about 40% of Japanese forest area) which, with their mono-vegetation and often poor management, have inadequate forage for wild animals (FA(a) 40; FA(b) 127-129; FA(c) 2; Takatsuki 2015(a) 141-142). Naturally, then, it is farmers who are most likely to come into conflict with deer.

Deer have, indeed, become the most troublesome of herbivores for the Japanese farmer. Vermin, from the point of view of agriculture, have been widely reported from different prefectures since the 1990s (Takatsuki 2015b 10-11). Among these, deer have caused the greatest damage in terms of area (JHA 32).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, when we look at the economic loss to agriculture caused by deer, since 2008 it has exceeded the amount caused by boar, the wild animal that previously caused the greatest loss. In 2015, deer damaged 51.2k ha of farmland, causing a loss of 6 billion Japanese yen to farmers (MAFF(a)). Moreover, the agriculture damage caused by deer has already become part of a vicious circle, since it leads to the creation of more abandoned land (MAFF(b) 284-285). Many small-scale farmers have been so frustrated by the damage caused by wild animals that they have simply withdrawn from farming (Takatsuki 2015a 178). The more farmland that has been given up, the more space there is for plants to flourish, and the more likely it is that the wild animals will come even closer to human habitation. Moreover, the damage caused by deer in mountain areas as a result of their overpopulation has recently drawn the attention of the general Japanese public. According to the results of questionnaires distributed (2009-2010) by the Society of Vegetation Science, botanists found that about 50% of the vegetation in Japan was affected by deer and one fifth of it significantly negatively affected (Ōno and Yoshikawa 49). This negative influence can be largely separated into two types: direct and indirect.

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<sup>10</sup> Other animals that are listed include boar and monkeys.

Direct influence consists of the effects of feeding, trampling, and damage to tree bark. For example, there is the “deer line,” which is the absence of greenery one meter from the ground. When the deer population is dense, plants are trampled and unlikely to grow and the demand to vegetation exceeds the supply that the forest can produce in a certain area, so the deer are trying to eat everything they can reach, from the ground to the leaves on the trees. As a result, there is a visible difference between the place that deer can reach and where they cannot. Below the “deer line” becomes relatively bare and only the plants that deer do not like can survive. This is particularly harmful in terms of the regeneration of the forest itself. For instance, the regeneration of Kasugayama Laurel Forest takes about 180 years on average (the time it takes from a tree dying and the creation of a canopy gap to the next time the canopy gap forms in the same place) (Maesako 2013 50). Botanists are especially worried about whether the forest can successfully regenerate, since the young trees have all been eaten by deer and the ground is nearly bare. In short, Kasugayama Laurel Forest looks likely to become a forest consisting of only those trees and plants that deer do not eat. Recently, some species that deer dislike, as well as the yellow leaves they usually ignore, have been found to have been eaten by deer, which is an indication that deer themselves are finding it difficult to obtain sufficient food (Maesako 2015 96; Torii 222).

Another direct influence is the damage to tree bark. When the trees are young and their trunks are thin, it is more likely that the deer will damage the bark around the trunk, and, if this happens, the tree will wither. It is particularly harmful to young trees, especially those that are still able to grow under the feeding pressures. The environment is even more harsh for the plants or trees that deer like. Even though they may not have disappeared from Japan, according to records these species, including endangered species, are dramatically declining, or have nearly disappeared in certain areas, which means there is a serious risk of reduced bio-diversity. For this reason, botanists concerned with preserving vegetation would like to

implement a solution as soon as possible (Hoshino and Ōhashi 69).

An example of indirect influence is the way in which the populations of some species will increase or decrease due to the change of habitat caused by deer. Such changes exert an impact on the populations of insects, birds, and mammals due to both the increase and decrease in available food. This, too, represents a serious threat to biodiversity. Humans are also a species that can be negatively affected. Since there is less vegetation in the mountains, this can contribute to erosion as well as reduce the ground's ability to store water. Dams may be filled and roads blocked as a result. These problems cost the government money to repair or to guard against. The overpopulation of deer also increases the potential for epidemics, such as Lyme disease, SFTS or Japanese spotted fever, as well as other complications that can develop from such diseases (Takatsuki 2015a 101-102). Since one deer carries thousands of mites, the increasing population of deer may raise the risk of such diseases in those who potentially have increasingly close contact with the deer.

The last indirect influence that is of concern to the Japanese government and public may be referred to as “emotional damage” to humans. Such emotional damage is caused by the disappearance of the scenery, particular its plant and animal species, that is perceived as having peculiarly Japanese cultural value, or which the Japanese people consider particularly attractive or evocative. Thus, one reason that the deer in Kasugayama, Nara, are considered vermin is that Kasugayama Laurel Forest is full of human value. There is an old tradition that it is a “forest where God dwells” (Kobune and Kawase 61).<sup>11</sup> The trees there have been protected since Kasuga-taisha was built, and the 300ha forest was designated a Natural Monument in 1924, a Special Natural Monument in 1956, and a World Heritage Site in 1998 (Kobune and Kawase 62). Therefore, the deer that are responsible for damaging the species in this valuable forest are seen as destroying a cherished cultural treasure. However, at the

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<sup>11</sup> My translation. The original text is 「神の座す森」.

same time, deer can somehow also be regarded with the same kind of emotional attachment. For instance, in September 2017, a veterinarian was brought in to care for a seriously injured deer at Nagoya castle (Moroboshi). The injury took two months to heal. It is believed that deer have been living in Nagoya castle since the Edo period, though only two are left nowadays. Even though deer are considered vermin, the Japanese people value those two deer by virtue of their association with the place (Nagoya castle) and the time (the Edo period). Keeping deer at the castle also maintains a certain kind of scenery that provides emotional comfort to the Japanese people: it conforms to their sense of the way the scenery there should be.

In this section, we have looked at both direct and indirect influences that are considered serious not only because of the damage that has already been found in the mountains, but also because there is evidence that the deer are expanding their habitat, suggesting a potential for such damage in other areas. Worse, the damage is considered difficult to recover from once the deer population has reached a certain point; it can take years for the environment to go back to its “original condition,” or to the condition that fulfills human expectations for that environment. Thus, while deer can retain a very positive image in certain limited contexts, as with the deer at Nagoya castle, they are increasingly being perceived as “vermin” by ecologists, the government, and the public in general. We shall now turn to a major contributing factor in this perception: the response of the Japanese government to the deer problem.

### The Response to the Deer Problem

The Japanese government has proposed two different categories of solution to agricultural vermin and the ecological management of the mountains: defense and attack. Defense here means the methods adopted to protect certain areas. One means of defense is

related to the depopulation of rural areas. Since the devastated farmland would blur the border between wild animals and human habitation, leading to wild animals coming close to human habitation and potentially causing more damage, one solution that the Japanese government considers is to effectively use such devastated and over-grown land. For example, farm animals are allowed to graze on the land, thereby creating clear territories that would act as buffers between the farmland and mountains. Another commonly considered method of defense is the traditional way used in the mountain and rural area: erecting fencing. Other methods aim to scare deer by using, for example, fireworks or machines that create loud sounds. However, though these methods are somewhat useful to farmers, they are not considered effective when it comes to protecting the whole of the mountain ecosystem. For example, deer can sometimes break the fences, which cost money to fix, and it is not a sustainable way to solve the problem, given the distances involved. Furthermore, the fence system is also limited in its ability to protect the vast unfarmed area in the mountains for other plants and animals. Another defensive approach, decided upon in 2017, is to use GPS collars and install cameras in the area that will potentially be “intruded” upon, in order to surveil the activities of the deer (MAFF(c)).

The attack approach is mainly orientated toward managing deer numbers. This is a matter of hunting using traps or guns, and is currently considered the most effective way to reduce the damage caused by deer. However, this is not a particularly easy way for the Japanese government to solve the problem. In Japan, hunting is illegal without a license. The number of people with hunting licenses reached its peak (500k) in the 1970s and early 1980s, but then dropped dramatically during the 1980s (Takatsuki 2015a 150-151). By 2000, the number was 210k, and the figure has not changed much since; in 2014, there were only around 194k hunters in Japan (JHA 29). Moreover, if we look at the breakdown of license holders, it emerges that the population of hunters is extremely aged: 65.5% in 2014 were over

60 years old, while young hunters in their 20s accounted for only 2.7%, and in their 30s 6.3% (JHA 29). In short, to increase hunting, the Japanese government needs to attract and educate new hunters.

In response to this situation, in 2007, the Japanese government put forward a law – the Act on Special Measures for Prevention of Damage Related to Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Caused by Wildlife – that was enacted in 2008, one of the aims of which was to set up “groups for the implementation of solutions to vermin” in each municipality (MAFF(d) 10).<sup>12</sup> It claims to have set up 1,200 groups throughout Japan by 2020 (MAFF(c)).

The number of deer being hunted has trebled since this law was enacted. While there were 200k captured in 2007, in 2014, there were almost 600k (MoE(a)). In 2017, the Japanese government set a target to kill 600k deer and boar combined, and announced that the 3.97 million population of 2012 would be reduced by almost half, to 2.1 million by 2023 (MAFF(c)). In addition, in 2015, the Japanese government renewed its “Law of Protection and Management of Wild Animals and the Justification of Hunting” (*Chōjū no hogo oyobi kanri narabini shuryō no tekiseika nikansuru hōritsu*) to lower the barriers to hunting. Once Japanese citizens reach 18, they can now hunt using traps (MoE(b) 2.6).

One of the results of this strategy to dramatically cut down deer numbers has been a lot more carcasses needing to be handled in a short space of time. This is no easy matter. Hunters have to carry them down the mountain. Moreover, not all the deer hunted become edible meat due to the difficulty of butchering at the site as well as the inadequacy of such

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<sup>12</sup> My translation. The original text is 「鳥獣被害対策実施隊」. Knight argues that, at least in the twentieth century, there has been little practical difference, from the hunters’ point of view, between hunting and precautionary culling in upland Japan: hunting in order to protect crops rather than to obtain animal products; ‘In Japanese law ... wildlife appears not as a positive resource but as a danger which potentially threatens human livelihoods. In the absence of a strong hunting tradition that accorded wildlife a positive value as game animals, wildlife has been viewed negatively. Although in the modern period wild animals were actively hunted for their economic value, this de facto status as a resource was at odds with their *de jure* status as a pest’ (Knight 64-66). In fact, as Knight acknowledged elsewhere, there is a tradition of hunting in Japan, but little contemporary consciousness of that fact (57); see also Nakazawa (*passim*).

facilities. There is also a risk that the meat will become contaminated in the process of being shot, which may leave tiny fragments of bullet in the meat, detectable only with expensive X-ray machines, or during butchering at the site (Hayashi and Ishizaka). Even though the author has not found any official records about how the hunters deal with the carcasses, she was told during fieldwork in Osaka that sometimes deer are simply buried, and that these bodies attract bear that will dig them up to eat.

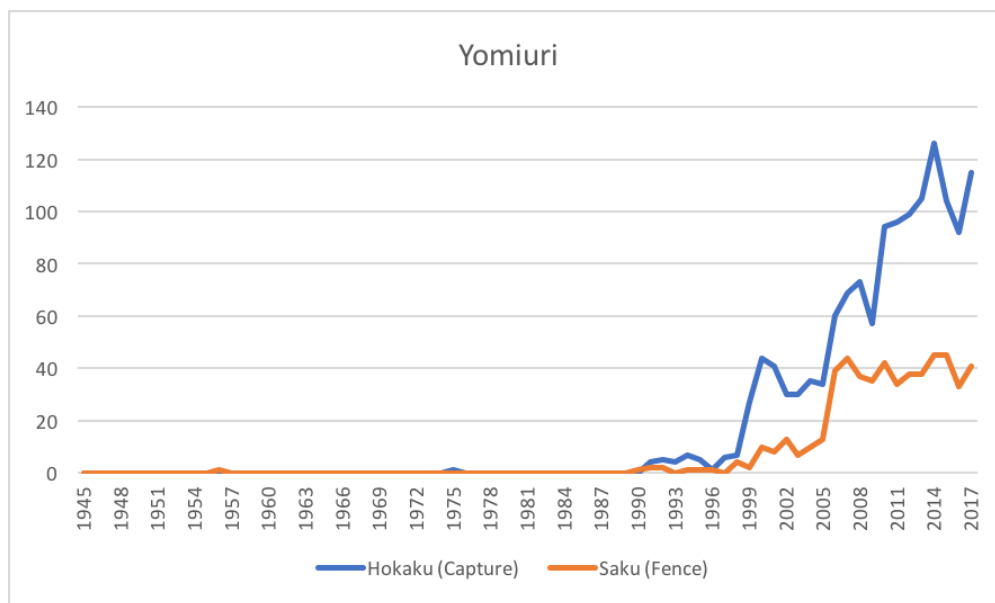
Faced with numerous carcasses and the cost of the procedure to handle them, the Japanese government decided to promote cuisine based on game at a national level. As part of the solution to the vermin problem, the government planned to increase the proportion of deer carcasses used for edible meat from 14% in 2014 to 30% in 2018 (MAFF(c)). Therefore, the government has encouraged the establishment of more facilities to handle deer carcasses and develop deer products commercially. According to 2017 data, there were 563 facilities for processing wild animals' carcasses in Japan in 2016; only Gunma, Fukushima, Iwate, and Aomori still did not have such facilities (MAFF(e) 6).

Rather than using the expression “wild meat cuisine,” the word *jibie*, from the French word *gibier* (game), is now commonly found in documents from the Japanese government as well as in news articles. In addition, in response to the policy mentioned above, there are *jibie* festivals held in several areas (Fukui; Kyoto; Mie). Some municipalities have introduced *jibie* on their official websites and in pamphlets created to introduce restaurants that serve *jibie* cuisine. Some emphasize the tastiness of the meat or its healthiness (it has less fat but more nutrients, such as calcium and iron, than beef, pork or chicken). Some of them also mention the eradication of vermin on the same page or in the same pamphlet; for instance, those produced in Nagano, Ehime and Tamba, Hyogo (Shinshu; Ehime; Tamba). One gourmet website managed by Totori Prefecture mentions that they see deer as a new food resource (SMT). The homepage of the Promotion Council of Inaba's Gibier, which is run by

a group of private parties, has a slogan on the banner that says “Turn the forest troublemakers into a regional treasure!” (PCoIG)<sup>13</sup> Wakayama Prefecture is providing boar and deer meat to primary and junior high schools that have requested it, in order to provide a school meal aimed at teaching the students to reduce the vermin by exterminating and eating them (Sankei). Selling wild animal meat brought 3.03 billion yen profit in 2016, 1.5 billion of which came from the sale of 665 tons of deer meat (e-STAT 1.3 and 1.6). Thus, *jibie* is not only being promoted as a means of reducing vermin and maintaining the balance of the ecosystem, but also as a means of increasing rural prosperity (MAFF(e) 4).

### Media Coverage

Among the solutions that we looked at in the previous section, the “attack” approach is the one that is being most obviously focused on by the Japanese government. This is also the case in the media coverage. Diagrams 2-4 show the frequency with which the three mainstream newspapers have been using “capture” (*hokaku*) and “fence” (*saku*) in articles about deer since 1945.



<sup>13</sup> My translation. The original text is 「森の厄介者を地域のお宝に！」.

Diagram 2 Frequency (articles) of *Yomiuri shinbun* associating deer with capture (*hokaku*) and fence (*saku*).

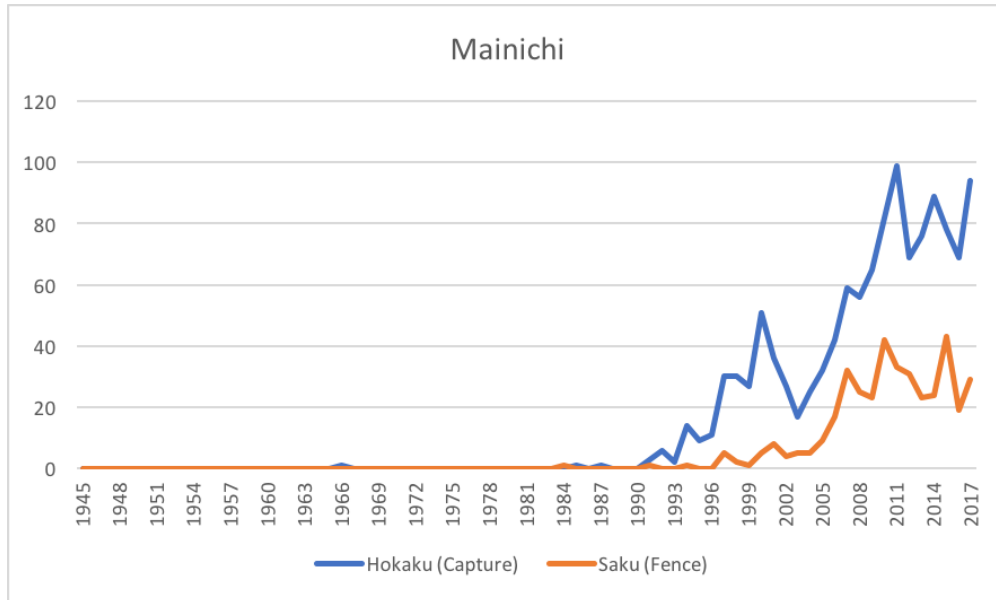


Diagram 3 Frequency (articles) of *Mainichi shinbun* associating deer with capture (*hokaku*) and fence (*saku*).

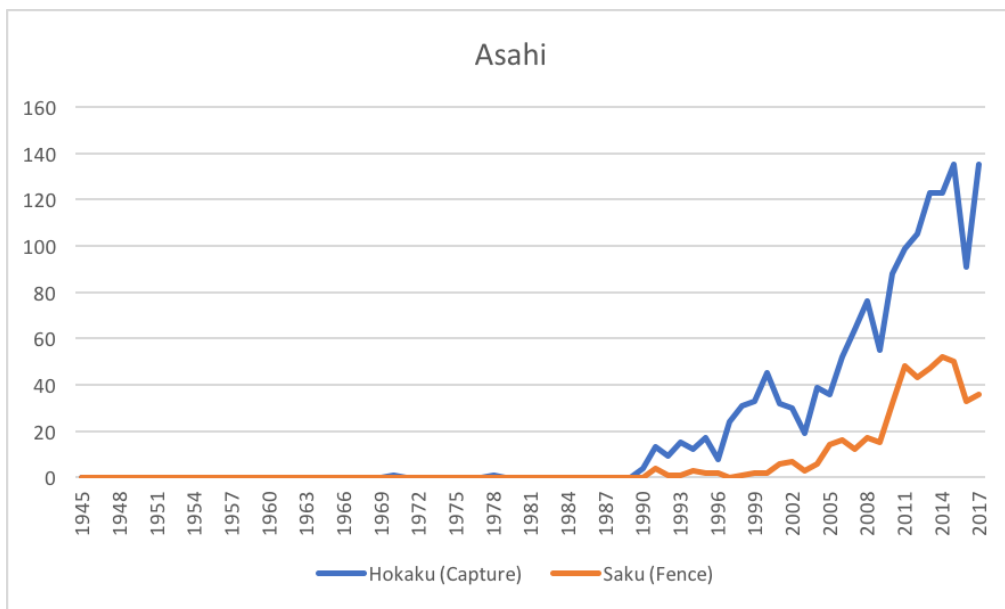


Diagram 4 Frequency (articles) of *Asahi shinbun* associating deer with capture (*hokaku*) and fence (*saku*).

If we look back to Diagram 1, it is clear that the idea of deer as vermin has been widely reported, and, from Diagrams 2-4, it is clear that the media has focused on the attack approach more than defense. There is no doubt that while the defense is more likely to be relevant to the people who stand at the frontline confronting deer, the attack approach – to consume the deer as *jibie* – is more relevant to the public.

Even though there is no clear evidence to show that the Japanese government has used the media to promote this cuisine, the number of articles that refer to deer in connection with cuisine and *jibie* in the three mainstream newspapers, the *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi* and *Asahi*, has greatly increased in recent years.

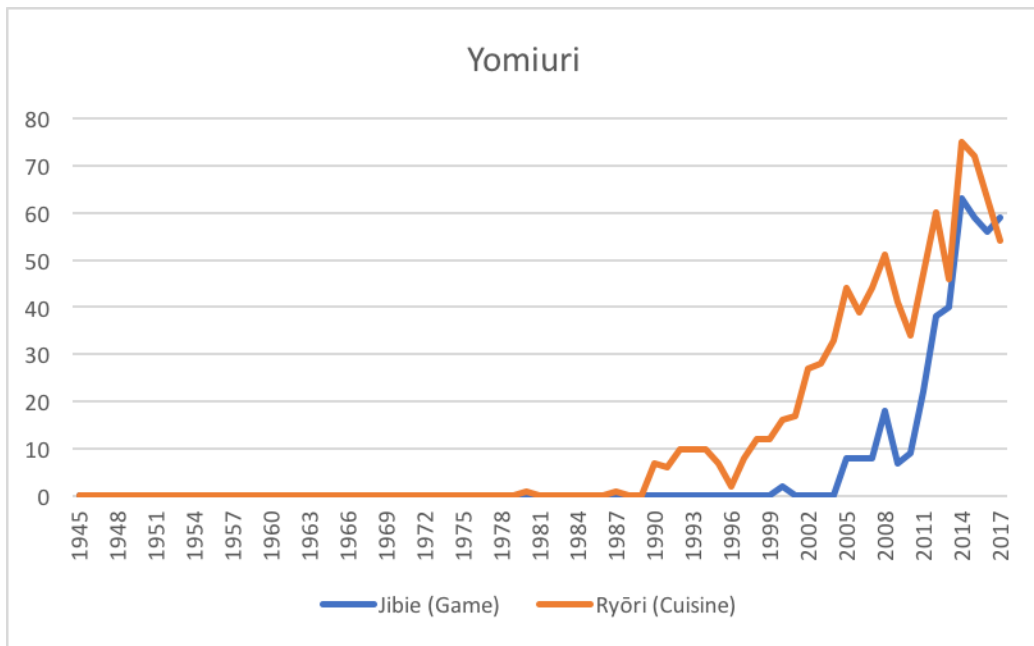


Diagram 5 Frequency of *Yomiuri shinbun* associations of deer with game and cuisine.

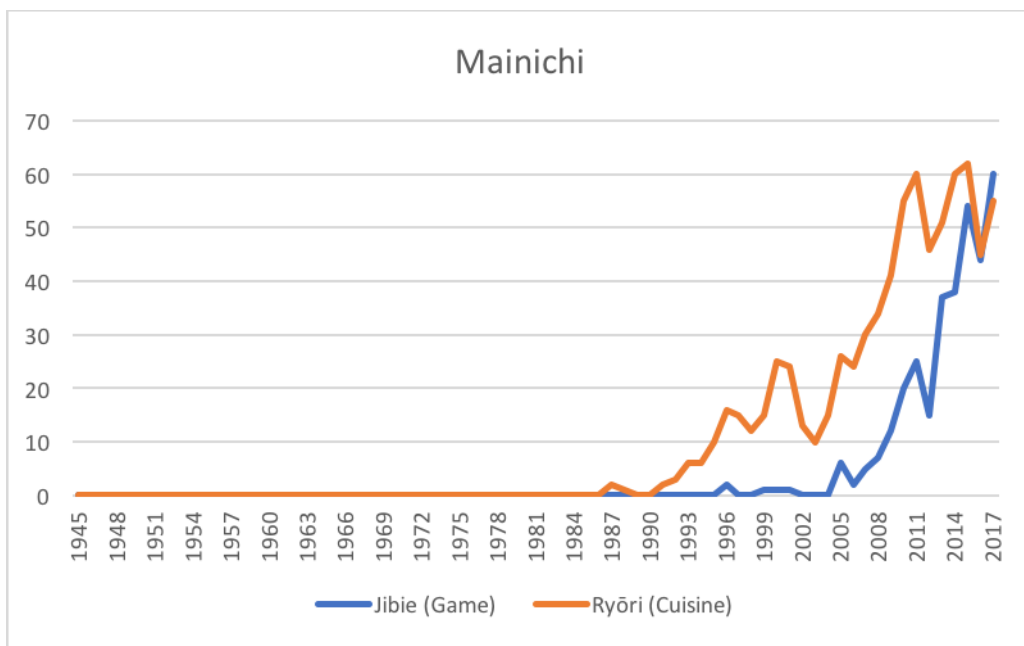


Diagram 6 Frequency of *Mainichi shinbun* associations of deer with game and cuisine.

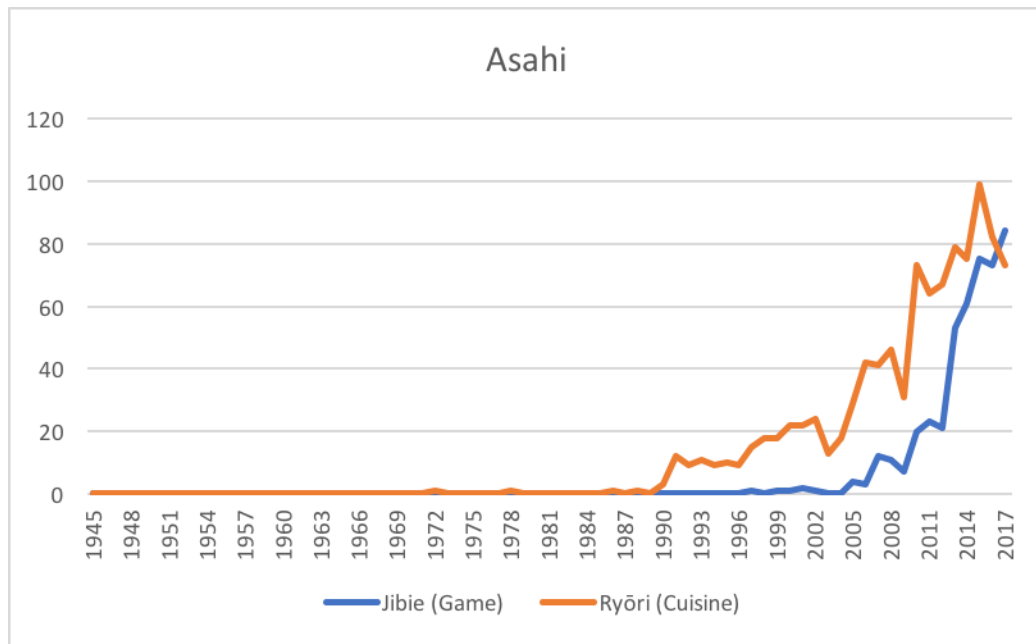


Diagram 7 Frequency of *Yomiuri shinbun* associations of deer with game and cuisine.

From Diagram 5-7, we can see that news articles associating deer with cuisine became increasingly common at the beginning of the 1990s, and that the use of *jibie* actually just starts from the second half of the 2000s. In 2017, the three mainstream newspapers associated deer with *jibie* more than with “cuisine.”

In fact, the influence on public perceptions of the strategic policies implemented by government and the numerous news articles portraying deer as vermin is already apparent. In 2012, a national survey revealed that about 50% of people had heard of *jibie*, and 90% were aware of the culture of eating wild animals (SCOP 2). According to a survey in 2017, of 196 people, 33 directly associated eating venison with the increasing population of deer in the mountains (Yoshimura and Hayashi 76).<sup>14</sup> Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that people who have had deer meat more than three times are likely to think that the

<sup>14</sup> Interviewees were given several options to answer the question “What do you think of eating deer?” (They could give more than one answer). The choice that people picked most was “It seems tasty” (53 people). The second was “It seems stinky” (51 people). The next most popular choices were “The meat is healthy” (49 people); “It is hard to imagine its taste” (47 people); “It is interesting because it’s rare (38 people); “The meat seems hard” (35 people); “It is better to eat because the population of deer is increasing” (33 people).

population is increasing in the mountains, and that more should be eaten. The people who have had deer many times have a positive image of the meat, and are more willing to have deer meat in order to protect the natural environment (Yoshimura and Hayashi 78).<sup>15</sup> Thus, as a result of exposure to the idea of deer as an ecological threat, Japanese people appear to be coming to view deer meat in a much more positive light than they previously did. In doing so, they are also becoming accustomed to the role that they have been assigned – to save the environment and preserve other species by consuming deer.

## Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to show how the Japanese government has actively promoted a shift in the perception of deer in line with a national policy to restrict their numbers. Moreover, this shift has been reflected in the portrayal of deer in Japanese media. The overall trend has been away from considering deer from a variety of viewpoints, and towards seeing them as principally vermin and, ironically perhaps, a threat to the environment that the whole of Japan should help to deal with by eating their flesh. Of course, deer have traditionally been seen as a food source in Japan, as elsewhere in the world, though arguably not in the first part of the second half of the twentieth century, during which they came to principally represent a picturesque aspect of Japanese cultural heritage. Indeed, this new way of viewing deer can be seen to sit rather uncomfortably with the residual sentimental view of deer as they are associated with castles, sacred sites, and the Japanese landscape in general. The very use of the foreign word *jibie*, and the fact that, as we have seen, it has only recently become prevalent, points to the way in which the government has had to work to establish an image of deer as a

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<sup>15</sup> My translation. The original text is 「(また、) 摂食回数が3回以上の人は、シカが野山に増えているので、食べたほうがよいと思っていることが推察された。シカ肉の摂取回数が多い人は、シカ肉に対する具体的な良いイメージがあり、自然環境保全の点からも積極的にシカ肉を摂取していることが推察された」.

food source. Nevertheless, as this paper has shown, there is evidence that the government has been successful in shifting public perception towards this more purely utilitarian viewpoint of deer as primarily either nuisance or resource.

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