Sacred Cervus: Deer Conservation Within Nara's Temple Precincts

ZACHARY ARMINE-KLEIN
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA : DOCTORAL STUDENT, DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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ZACHARY ARMINE-KLEIN

The sika deer[1] of Nara have been a symbol of the Kansai region, and Japan at large, for over one thousand years. For the majority of recorded history, with few exceptions, they have been held sacred by Kōfukuji 興福寺 Temple and Kasuga Taisha 春日大社 Shrine as *shinroku* 神鹿 (divine emissaries). They were officially designated as a *tennen kinenbutsu* 天然記念物 (a natural monument) in 1957, enshrining them within both the sacred confines of temple grounds and the profane boundaries of the sociopolitical world as protected objects. Because of this, their population spiked in the twentieth century, leading to a slew of ecological and human-made disasters that culminated in 2017 with the prefectural government calling for the first officially sponsored culling of Nara's sika deer. The effects and success of this population control project have resulted in a wide range of academic and popular discussions on the (non) acceptability of killing these sacred beasts. However, little attention has been paid to how sacrality has been applied to Nara's sika deer or its role in shaping both the historical conservation practices and the more recent population management initiative. Furthermore, there has yet to be an in-depth study on how this notion of sacredness has influenced popular discourses on the status of Nara's sika deer as a protected species, ecological nightmare, local pest, tourist attraction, and public safety risk. This article traces the history of deer conservation in Nara before discussing the role that sacrality and naturalization have played in shaping the discourse on Nara's sika deer.

Situating Nara within the Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm

The narrative that Japanese religion, and particularly Shinto, is an environmentally conscious practice that has a deep respect for nature arguably began as a response to Lynn White Jr.'s famous 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." White alleged the global environmental crisis was the direct result of Judeo-Christian claims that man is master over the rest of creation, and thus free to exploit it.[2] This led in short succession to leading scholars of the time, such as Masao Watanabe, H. Byron Earhart, and David Shaner to posit that perhaps Eastern (including Shinto) attitudes toward nature could offer an alternative and more eco-conscious metaphysics than those found within the

1 The term "sika deer" is used intentionally in this article to reflect the established English name for the species, which is derived from the Japanese word for deer, *shika* 鹿.

2 White, "The Historical Roots."

Judeo-Christian world.[3] This initial discourse has been thoroughly critiqued by other scholars for its orientalist and often surface-level analyses of complex and nuanced religious traditions; however, it has served as a starting point for a much larger engagement in the field by multiple generations of scholars. In particular, it gave rise to the notion of an eco-conscious and environmentally motivated religious practice as a subject that ought to be explored in careful detail.

Among those who have pursued this line of inquiry is Aike Rots, who has carried out extensive studies on forest-based practices within Japanese religious communities.[4] Similarly, Fabio Rambelli has done substantial research on the role of vegetal and other traditionally inanimate objects as actors and subjects within Shinto and Japanese Buddhist communities.[5] These and many similar studies have proliferated and given rise to a rather widespread mythos of Shinto environmentalism.[6] This sentiment has grown not just within academic circles, but also within popular media and the blogosphere through sites such as *Green Shinto*.[7] However, there are some gaps within the current discourse. First, the majority of studies focus solely on flora with very limited attention being given to the fauna of the natural world. Second, there is often a sense among these studies, and certainly within popular discourse, that the history of Shinto is one of partnership with nature, wherein the human and the natural world have coexisted as agentive partners in the creation of an environmentally conscious religious tradition. While the scholarly sources tend to note the nuance of this history as often flawed and existing only in specific localities, many popular sources have taken this narrative as gospel and run wild with it. An outcome that is often to the detriment of local ecosystems, peoples, and animals.

As such, this article addresses both of these gaps in the discourse: first, by looking at the conservation history of the sika deer of Nara, since the site represents one of the earliest hubs for religious practice in Japan, and because it has been uniquely entwined with the management and protection of natural resources, namely deer, for almost the entirety of the city's recorded history; and second, by analyzing the relationship between deer and humans to show that while there are plenty of examples of co-constitutive relationships throughout Japanese religious history and practice, there are notable exceptions, and beneficial coexistence is not guaranteed. Instead, often both historically and contemporaneously, religious practice and a deep-seated myth of partnership with nature has been utilized to downplay or obfuscate the ways in which the natural world has been reduced to gross resources meant to be extracted, exploited, or neglected for human gain.

History of Deer Conservation in Nara

The legend goes that in 768 CE, Takemikazuchi 武甕槌, the tutelary god of the Fujiwara 藤原 clan, rode a snow-white deer from Kashima 鹿島 Shrine in the Kantō area to the top of Mt. Mikasa 三笠 in Nara in order to protect the imperial court.[8] Kasuga Shrine was thus established to house and honor this guardian deity. This seemingly innocuous detail of Takemikazuchi's cervid mount, which appears in a brief genealogy found on the first page of the fourteenth-century *Kasuga gongen genki e* 春日権現験記絵 (*The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity*), would become the basis for the sacred status of all deer within the city of Nara. This sacred status, recorded in the *genki e* although potentially established earlier, would serve as the catalyst for the subsequent centuries of anthropogenic ecological change within Nara, and the surrounding prefectures as, for better and for worse, various ritual, conservational, and tourist practices developed around Nara's deer.

While this legend claims the sacred status of the Nara deer dates back to 768, the first verifiable piece of policy relating to them comes from a string of missives written by courtiers and Kasuga priests starting in 1006 and continuing throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[9] Within these writings, a case is made for deer, and specifically the sika deer of Nara, being *shinroku* and, as such, deserving of a protected status. It is impossible to know how effective this policy was, given the primarily

3 Earhart, "The Ideal of Nature"; Watanabe, "The Conception of Nature"; Shaner, "The Japanese Experience of Nature."
4 Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology*.
5 Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*; Rambelli, "Floating Signifiers."
6 For more on the history of the "Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm," see Rots, "Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation," which traces the genealogy of the discourse in extreme detail.
7 www.greenshinto.com.
8 Tyler, *Miracles*.
9 Fujiwara Yukinari, *Gonki*; Fujiwara Munetada, *Chūyūki*.

theological nature of these claims and the lack of material evidence associated with deer during this period. However, by the early medieval period, these arguments were picked up by Kōfukuji, the temple that governed the entire Yamato Province, including Nara. Additionally, in the wake of an alleged rise in deer hunting by disgruntled peasants who were frustrated by damages to their crops caused by these sacred cervidae, Kōfukuji conferred upon Nara's deer the same legal status as *jinin* 神人 (shrine officials). As a result, killing a deer could now be prosecuted in court, with the most common punishment for those found guilty being the death penalty.[10] This policy was maintained by Kōfukuji until the start of the Tokugawa shogunate at the turn of the seventeenth century, when Tokugawa Ieyasu established the new system of domains (*han* 藩) and a new bureaucracy to manage them and adjudicate on behalf of the shogunate.

During this bureaucratic shuffle, there was a brief period when Nara's deer were ostensibly unprotected, since under the establishment of the new government, Kōfukuji lost its legitimacy as a ruling body over the region, resulting in the deer of Nara losing the legal status that had been conferred to them by the temple. However, in 1602, just two years after the Battle of Sekigahara 関ヶ原, which had propelled Tokugawa Ieyasu to primacy as the military and ultimate leader of Japan, Ieyasu himself again declared Nara deer as "divine deer" (*shinroku*) and prescribed decapitation as the punishment for killing them.[11] This ordinance seems to have been largely effective, but over the following decades, public sentiment toward the deer soured, as locals and pilgrims brought forward complaints about being attacked by bucks. In 1671, on orders from the shogunate, the priests of Kasuga Shrine responded by inventing a new annual ritual called the Shika no Tsunokiri 鹿の角切り (deer antler cutting ritual). Every October, teams of ten shrine attendants would chase down and capture bucks, and a priest would then saw off their horns, cap the stubs with smooth metal, and offer the removed antlers to the gods of Kasuga.[12] Records of this ritual show two trends: first, there was a rapid decline in both injuries and property destruction by bucks, and second, for the rest of the Edo period (1603–1868), Nara's deer population remained stable. This can be inferred from the fact that, for most of this era, an average of two hundred bucks had their antlers removed during any given year. In addition to these religiously based conservation efforts, the Edo period also saw the start of a proto-tourism based around the temples of Nara and, interestingly, the deer.

In the year following Tokugawa Ieyasu's declaration that Nara's deer were to be officially recognized as *shinroku*, a new cottage industry began to arise in the city of Nara. These early entrepreneurs would use rice bran, wheat, and water to produce votive rice crackers that pilgrims and locals alike could purchase to feed Nara's deer. These businesses proved wildly successful and helped develop a whole culture of making offerings to Nara's deer. This ultimately altered the behavior and physiology of the deer in significant ways. First and foremost, during this period, Nara's deer developed the habit of bowing to visitors in exchange for food. Before the Edo period, there is no mention of such behavior, but by the end of the Edo period and the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912), this behavior had become so common that one would be hard-pressed to find an image, let alone a description of Nara's deer, that did not include it. Second, the act of offering votive rice crackers to Nara's deer seems to have changed the territorial and nutritional habits of the deer. While from the early eighth through late seventeenth centuries, Nara's deer remained relatively scattered, roaming between the flatlands just outside the city's central urban hub into the mountains of the shrine precincts in pursuit of a variety of plants to eat, by the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of Nara's herd had come to maintain a near permanent residence on the flatlands at the heart of Nara's urban center, surviving off a diet of short grass, leaves, acorns, and rice crackers, leading to extreme population density.[13]

Surprisingly, the protected status of the deer and the constant influx of pilgrims giving them votive rice crackers did not pose a problem until 1868. In the pursuit of modernization and their avid disavowal of what they saw as "primitive superstition," the newly formed Meiji government did away with the religious

10 Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park."

11 Ibid., p. 350; "Man Admits to Killing a Deer in Nara, a Protected Animal, With Ax," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 3 March 2021, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14236836.

12 Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park."

13 Watanabe, "Nara no shika hogo kanri"; Takagi et al., "A Historic Religious Sanctuary"; Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park."

category of *shinroku*, relegating the deer of Nara to the same status as any other wild animal. In the wake of this monumental shift, the prefectural government of Nara confined some seven hundred deer within a series of enclosures, in order to prevent damage to crops as the deers had to expand their roaming and grazing patterns due to the loss of rice cakes from tourists. However, due to the extreme population density, further intensified by confinement to these smaller enclosures, the herd's population dropped to a mere thirty-eight individuals as the deer died from overcrowding. To combat this existential threat to Nara's deer, in 1902 Kasuga Shrine, in coordination with a local group known as the Foundation for the Protection of Nara Deer (Ippan Zaidan Hōjin Nara no Shika Aigokai 一般財団法人奈良の鹿愛護会), declared the precincts of Mt. Kasuga a conservation area for deer and began a project of building deer-proof fences and ditches around the reserve. They also began offering compensation for crop damages if farmers would capture and return deer to Kasuga, rather than simply kill them.[14] While at first this system was relatively successful, as World War II intensified and the funds, manpower, and time to maintain conservation practices dwindled, so too did Nara's deer population. By the end of the war in 1945, even the most generous estimates had the total population of the herd at a mere seventy-nine individuals.[15]

In the wake of Nara's declining deer population, the postwar period saw a resurgence in conservation practices. In 1957, Nara's deer were recognized as a natural monument (*tennen kinenbutsu*) since they "blend in with the appealing scenery of the park and provide the most beautiful natural scenery of Japan with wildlife."[16] This, once again, conferred upon the deer a protected status of the highest level and, as a result, local authorities in league with the Foundation for the Protection of Nara Deer began working on the enforcement of new conservation policies, including the capture and release of deer found in surrounding farmlands, the quarantining and care for pregnant does, and a renewal of the Shika no Tsunokiri from the Edo period. This led to a spike in the deer population, with the herd growing to 1,200 individuals by the end of the twentieth century, and, as of 2017, to at least 1,500.[17] However, the population spike has led to both tremendous opportunities within the tourist and consumer sectors relating to Nara's deer, alongside challenges regarding the relationship between Nara's local human population and deer population, and some ecological concerns.

Development of Modern Tourism: Conservation as Consumption

Many of the conservational and ritual practices developed over the past thirteen centuries, since the first mention of deer as a divine mount, have been reimagined and redeveloped as for-profit consumer experiences, as part of the local tourist economy, or as a means of funding continued conservation efforts. The first shift toward a consumerist mode of engagement was the expansion of the rice cracker business from a local cottage industry into a series of industrialized corporations. The oldest of these is Takeda Toshio Shoten 武田俊男商店, which received the first official accreditation for votive rice cracker production back in 1917.[18] Since then, local workshops have merged into four other factories, leading to a major increase in the number of rice crackers for deer produced annually. This expanded supply of rather high-caloric food, along with a steady increase in tourism to Japan over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has played no small part in bolstering the Nara herd population to over 1,500, more than doubling its peak in the late nineteenth century.

In similar fashion, many of the rituals associated with deer were transformed into tourist events. While initially the Shika no Tsunokiri, renewed in 1957, was conducted in line with the tradition established in the Edo period—with all male bucks being trimmed during October within the sacred confines of Kasuga Shrine—it has since been adjusted to accommodate the much larger herd size, as well as to profit off of tourists. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to this day, the local government of Nara drastically changed how they

14 Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park."

15 Kawamura, "Nara kōen no shika"; Tatsuzawa, Fujita, and Itō, "Nara kōen heichibu."

16 Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park," p. 351.

17 Takagi et al., "A Historic Religious Sanctuary"; Iijima et al., "Current Sika Deer."

18 Takatsuki, "Nara kōen no shokusei"; Casey Baseel, "This Nara Workshop Has Been Making Deer Crackers for More than 100 Years and Offers Tours [photos]," *SoraNews24*, 12 July 2021, soranews24.com/2021/07/12/this-nara-workshop-has-been-making-deer-crackers-for-more-than-100-years-and-offers-tours%E3%80%90photos%E3%80%91/.

managed the Shika no Tsunokiri. Local game wardens begin the trimming procedures at the very start of spring and trim the majority of the bucks' horns within secular facilities divorced from any ritual practices. While performing these routine trims, the wardens select bucks with uniquely large or aesthetically pleasing antlers, capture them, and then hold them in captivity until October when the annual Shika no Tsunokiri ritual is held.[19] At the time of the ritual, these prize bucks are transported to Kasuga Shrine, whereupon the Shika no Tsunokiri ritual is conducted in front of a crowd of paying tourists (¥1,000 for adults and ¥500 for children).[20]

Finally, Nara municipality itself has spent considerable efforts presenting the deer to domestic and international news outlets, as well as leveraging online influencers on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, to promote the beauty and cuteness of Nara's bowing deer to further drive up the number of visitors to Nara's deer park. This has led to Nara's deer being nutritionally reliant on the supplementary calories of the votive rice crackers, and Nara's local economy becoming deeply reliant on tourism.

Deer Damage and Cervid Conflict

This coexistence has given rise to a popular myth, championed by various public-facing Nara officials, that people and deer live in harmony within Nara. Takeda Hiroyasu, the head of Nara's Prefectural Office for the Management of Nara Park (Nara Kenritsu Nara Kōen Jimusho 奈良県立奈良公園事務所), has gone on record saying, "[deer] are integral to the lives of people in Nara. We do not even turn our heads when a deer passes by us. They are part of our daily life, and we co-exist with them." He hopes that people from outside of Nara can learn to emulate this peaceful coexistence.[21] This image of Nara as a unique place where humans and nature live in harmony is taken up and proffered by countless travel blogs, tourist-facing government websites, and in the testimonials of officials such as Takeda. However, the reality is far less utopic than the narrative.

First and foremost, due to the high population density of the Nara herd, it is not uncommon for individual deer to stray from the protected park and cause damage when entering agricultural fields surrounding the main urban hub of Nara. Deer-inflicted destruction became so severe that in 1979 local farmers brought a class-action lawsuit against the prefecture in order to claim compensation for hundreds of thousands of dollars in deer-related damages.[22] Ultimately, this case resulted in an arbitrated settlement that ostensibly allowed for more intensive control of deer outside Kasuga shrine's precincts. Despite this, enforcement was still carried out by the prefectural government, which, fearing potential blowback from tourists, simply continued the same capture-and-release programs as before. As a result, there was no notable decrease in annual crop damages.[23]

Similarly, despite numerous studies warning that the overpopulation of deer in Nara is leading to widespread deforestation, including the destruction of UNESCO sites such as Nara's primeval spruce forests, local governmental bodies have been reluctant to act.[24] Local tourist pamphlets will even overlook such claims, instead saying the deer are an ecological boon since "deer provide natural fertilizer and mowing for the park."[25] This mode of thinking is further justified by a false logic, promulgated by Japanese popular media and local officials alike, according to which Nara's deer could not possibly be an issue since they are a natural part of Nara's ecosystem that has existed for well over a thousand years.[26] In 2008, in response to studies suggesting that Nara's deer were responsible for millions of dollars in damages to local forests over the past decade, Fukumoto Chiharu, a senior staffer at the Foundation

19 Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park," pp. 350–51.

20 Bryan Baier, "Deer Antler-Cutting at Nara," *JapanTravel*, 5 October 2015, en.japantravel.com/nara/nara-deer-antler-cutting-ceremony/23582.

21 "Man Admits to Killing a Deer in Nara."

22 Winifred Bird, "Nara's Cute, Destructive Deer," *The Japan Times*, 29 October 2008, www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2008/10/29/environment/naras-cute-destructive-deer/; Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park," pp. 351–52.

23 Bird, "Nara's Cute, Destructive Deer"; Torii and Tatsuzawa, "Sika Deer in Nara Park," pp. 355–56.

24 Yumoto and Matsuda, *Sekai isan o shika ga kuu*; Shimoda et al., "The Regeneration of Pioneer Tree"; Takagi et al., "The Sacred Deer Conflict of Management."

25 https://naradeer.com/learning/ecology.html

26 "Deer in Nara Park Have Unique Genes Preserved for 1,000 Years," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 1 June 2023, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14829195; Fukushima University, "[Press Release] Protecting Messengers of the Gods: Conservation of Nara Park Deer Has Resulted in Unique Genetic Lineage," https://english.adb.fukushima-u.ac.jp/news/2023/03/011338.html.

for the Protection of Deer in Nara, went on record stating "[d]eer have been living in Nara since people founded the city over one thousand years ago. I don't think they are responsible for trees in the old-growth forest dying. Rather, the reason Nara Park is such a beautiful environment is because of the deer."[27] Unfortunately, neither Fukumoto nor anyone else on staff at the Foundation for the Protection of Deer in Nara have any training in forestry or forest management to put forth a more scientifically backed claim.[28] Similarly, such notions that the deer of Nara have simply been living there for over one thousand years overlook the effects people have had on these deer and the land they live on. Since at least the fourteenth century, humans have directly managed and controlled the population of deer in Nara, either intentionally through conservation or unintentionally by enriching their diets and the amount of food available to them through votive rice crackers.

Despite claims by the prefectural government and the Foundation for the Protection of Deer in Nara that the Shika no Tsunokiri is effective in managing the risk of injury related to the deer of Nara, studies have shown that in the twenty-first century the number of deer-related injuries in and around Nara has skyrocketed along with the increase in the deer's population. Between 2014 and 2018, Nara saw a 360 percent increase in injuries, despite tourist numbers only increasing by around 14.2 percent. Of these injuries, 20 percent were caused by horns, which signals that the traditional methods of trimming are themselves ineffective or that their implementation is too difficult to conduct quickly and efficiently on the increasing herd size. The vast majority of victims in these cases are tourists, not long-term residents, which local officials will proudly argue demonstrates that Nara's locals have learned to live in harmony with the deer and tourists are simply ignorant of how to appropriately interact with them. However, it is important to note that, per capita, residents actually get injured at higher rates than tourists.[29]

Ultimately, as more and more deer are forced into close encounters with an increasing number of tourists, the safety of both deer and human populations is rapidly deteriorating. In response to this, as well as pressure from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (Nōrinsuisanshō 農林水産省), Nara implemented a deer cull in 2017 that was almost immediately met with widespread public outcry. Most likely due to this intense negative response, the culling effort has largely been ineffective and, over the course of the year, only 120 individuals, mostly ill and elderly, were culled before the program was ultimately halted by early 2018.[30] However, this culling effort represented a stopgap measure and merely passed the buck on solving the root causes of property damage, deforestation, public safety, and population density.

The Effects of COVID-19 on Conservation and Conflict in Nara

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began. As with many systemic issues, it exacerbated many of the conflicts and tensions relating to the deer of Nara. The strict limits placed on tourism during this period drastically reduced the number of visitors to Nara, bringing down the number of votive rice crackers being offered by tourists to the deer. Having lost this critical food source, the already overburdened ecosystem could not support the massive herd, and emaciated individuals started roaming far and wide into the agricultural and residential areas surrounding Nara. This was met with outcry by both farmers and homeowners who were facing increased damages from the now desperate deer, as well as from concerned animal rights activists who feared mass starvation would occur due to the loss of a major food source.[31] In response, the Nara prefectural government opened two new conservation zones within Nara Park and started corralling the scattered deer into these enclosures to mitigate damage and ostensibly feed and care for the herd in the absence of tourists. However, concerned locals and whistleblowers quickly discovered that care within these new enclosures was far from

27 Bird, "Nara's Cute, Destructive Deer."
28 Ibid.
29 Kawaguchi et al., "Nara kōen no shika."
30 Anna Firfield, "Japan's Famous Nara Deer Are Being Culled," *The Washington Post*, 1 August 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/01/oh-deer-naras-famous-four-legged-creatures-are-being-culled/.
31 Annie Roth, "Brawling Monkeys. Wandering Deer. Blame Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, 16 March 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/science/hungry-monkeys-deer-coronavirus.html; Misuzu Tsukue, "Probe Ordered as Whistle-Blower Says Deer Being Abused in Nara," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 23 November 2023, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15047851.

adequate and even borderline abusive. One whistleblower reported seeing deer so emaciated that their bones were visible, likening the enclosures to concentration camps rather than conservation zones. This led to debates and conspiracy theories suggesting that, rather than caring for the deer, these zones were an attempt to continue the failed culling of 2017. This conspiracy theory quickly caught on, since locals still distrusted the local municipality's conservation practices after the cull. Particularly notable in this respect, for the first few weeks after the local government had announced the new "herd management program" in June of 2017, most government officials and local media glossed over—or outright failed to mention—that the deer captured during this program would be killed. When local activists finally caught on and called the local government out on their actions, the officials eventually let the public know about the cull, but it eroded local trust immensely. Perhaps due to this earlier lack of transparency, as soon as rumors of abuse and conspiracy started arising during the pandemic, the local municipality took the allegations very seriously and avidly denied all claims, arguing that they were providing adequate care for the animals in their charge.[32] Ultimately, it seems to have been the case that the municipal government was telling the truth, since in the post-pandemic period local deer populations have hit an all-time historical high, dwarfing the size of the herd prior to the 2017 cull.[33] Either way, outrage about the treatment of the deer exemplified the concern of the people of Nara for the safety of the animals in spite of their propensity for injuring hundreds of people a year, causing millions of dollars in damages, and quite literally consuming world heritage. This raises the question as to why people jumped into action at this moment, or in 2017 when the first cull began, let alone in 1957 when Nara's deer became a natural monument, despite all the reasons to view Nara's deer as pests at best, or an ecological nightmare at worst.

Enchanted by Nature: The Paradoxical Myth of Nara

The answer to these questions lies within the myth of Nara as a haven of coexistence and local notions of conservation. As is apparent from the comments made by Takeda Hiroyasu, the head of Nara's Prefectural Office for the Management of Nara Park, and Fukumoto Chiharu of the Foundation for the Protection of Deer in Nara Park, there is a narrative that Nara's deer are natural, pure, and innocent; they existed before people settled in Nara and have remained an unchanged and pure part of the local environment for thousands of years. This erases the anthropogenic changes in the environment and ecology of Nara. Rather than acknowledging centuries of population management conducted within Nara's precincts, an image is instead perpetuated of Nara's deer existing outside the human world. It is an anthropo-exclusive view that can only be maintained by averting one's gaze from the fact that everything about these deer has been conditioned by human hands. From the population, which has risen and fallen for over a thousand years in response to religious and secular policies, to their gut flora, which was altered by the introduction of rice crackers to their diet in 1603, to their very genome, which has become unique among all other herds in Japan due to their relative isolation within Nara's precincts—all of these things are anthropogenic in nature.[34] Despite all this, local officials, environmental activists, and the mass media doggedly embrace the image of Nara's deer as a natural wonder. As a result, any damage they cause or environmental danger they represent are seen as natural. In stark contrast, any damage done to them by humans, or attempts to manage and control their population, is decried as a human invasion of the natural world.

32 Tsukue, "Probe Ordered as Whistle-Blower Says Deer Being Abused in Nara."

33 Iijima et al., "Current Sika Deer."

34 Takatsuki, "Nara kōen no shokusei."

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