

The Japanese Macaques Problem. Analyzing how the Japanese perceive and deal with them through a sociological lens to gain insight into Japanese Society with regards to the Macaque Problem.

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The essay examines the complex relationship between Japanese society and Japanese macaques, using sociological theories to understand perceptions and responses to the macaque problem. It discusses how macaques are viewed either as pests causing economic and social disruptions, particularly in rural areas, or as culturally and ecologically significant entities that contribute to tourism, biodiversity, and social cohesion.

The essay explores the significance of macaques and their effect on Japanese society through a functionalist and conflict theorist perspective. It also explores the religious and cultural portrayal of macaques, and their effect on societal values.

The essay contributes to the topic by integrating sociological frameworks to explain the divergent perceptions and their impact on policy and public attitudes. It underscores the ethical and practical challenges of managing macaques amidst urbanization and societal pressures. It advocates for balanced, multi-faceted approaches that mitigate conflicts while respecting ecological and cultural values, providing a nuanced understanding of human-animal interactions in Japan.

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This paper aims to inquire how Japanese macaques are perceived and dealt with by the Japanese population, involving different social structures like families, industries, or governments, and through sociological theoretical frameworks, gain insight into what these reveal about Japanese society regarding the problem.

In Japan, there exist various perceptions of Japanese macaques. The most common perception of them today are that of pests or nuisances, as reinforced by most media and news outlets(Maishman, 2022). As of 2022, Japanese macaques have been responsible for attacking and injuring around 50 people in the Yamaguchi region alone, and authorities have recently started to hunt the monkeys in 2022 after numerous attacks on adults and children, despite injuries only being minor bites and scratches(Maishman, 2022). However, attacks have shown a rising trend, and become increasingly concerning with how frequently the macaques are able to approach Japanese homes(Treon, 2022). Moreover, many Japanese crop owners consider the macaque to be a nuisance, on account of the fact that they are the 3rd worst crop pest behind wild boar and deer(Sprague, 2002). This also means that by disrupting the agriculture industry, they pose an economic threat to Japan's society. From a functionalist theoretical perspective, Japanese macaques are seen as a pest and nuisance as they disrupt key industries like the agriculture industry and harm the populus who are key for upholding the operations of society via jobs, education, and other manpower intensive activities. As such, they disrupt society and need to be dealt with in order for society to function, hence their perception as "pests" and this perception is promoted to raise awareness of the problem.

On the other hand, there are others in Japan who defend the macaques highlighting the benefits that they bring to society, as well as the need to protect their species due to their ecological significance. Despite the economic threat they pose in affected regions, the macaques do have economic benefits. Japanese macaques do attract tourists to Japan who want to meet the monkeys up close. As of 2024, the tourism industry surrounding Japanese macaques has become an important industry in some areas of Japan(Japan Experience, 2024). From a functionalist theoretical perspective Japanese macaques are seen as a boon and crucial to the Japanese tourism industry and its economy as it allows them to function properly through interest and revenue, and to eliminate the macaques would disrupt the tourism industry in Japan.

Japanese Macaques are also important to the ecology of the areas they reside in, and are responsible for seed dispersal and pest control through their dietary and excrement patterns, habit modification via shaping the structure of plant communities through foraging activities and soil digging, and help to maintain ecological balance by preying on insects and small animals(Enari & Enari, 2016). Due to the significance of Japanese macaques to Japan's ecology in these regions, they can be considered to be crucial to the functioning of social structures in the area, like the

farming and agricultural industry, and thus they gain a positive perception where protection and conservation of macaques are prioritized.

As such, people who advocate for the protection of Japanese macaques highlight their unique culture and ecological significance as something that needs to be protected through conservation efforts and deterrence against hunting. From a conflict theorist perspective they view the elimination and containment of the Japanese macaques as endangering the unique culture of the macaques and the ecosystems they live in, in favour of other priorities such as agricultural development and industry. These different ideological priorities create conflicts between the two groups, complicating the problem.

Other defenders of Japanese macaques perceive them through a religious lens, highlighting their symbolic value in folklore and religion and viewing them as “cultural or religious icons”. In Shinto, monkeys hold great religious significance as they have the symbolic role of mediating between deities and humans(Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989), and people go to shrines like those of Sarutahiko Ōkami(monkey-field prince great god) for religious worship, a god closely linked to monkeys and is known as the god of guidance, liked with good harvests, good luck in businesses and good direction, thus making macaques to be treated as sacred animals by some due to association with this god.(Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989). Through Durkheim’s perspective(Thompson, 2024), the macaques play an important role in creating social cohesion among the faithful. By venerating monkey associated deities, worshippers participate in rituals that reinforce shared values and a sense of community. Worship acts as a means of social solidarity, reinforcing collective identity through shared rituals and festivals, like how the practice of offering prayers for safe travels or asking for guidance during times of uncertainty reflects the broader social need for cohesion and security. By collectively engaging in these rituals, the community affirms its shared moral values and mutual support, reflective of Japanese society who has historically prioritized and shown high levels of social cohesion(Inoue et al., 2013). The macaques are also commonly used in proverbs, and are the species utilized in the “three wise monkeys”, meaning “see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil”, aiming to convey moral teachings about avoiding negativity. These teachings could serve as a way for Japanese people to cope with latent anxieties such as stress from work, common in the social structure of the Japanese workforce(Nemeth & Lai, 2024). The three monkeys offer a straightforward, symbolic guide to navigating complex ethical dilemmas in life. Avoiding "evil" thoughts, words, and actions can provide psychological comfort and reduce anxiety about moral failings. The simplicity of the teaching makes it accessible, offering individuals a way to maintain inner peace and harmony amid societal pressure, however it could also mean that inequalities from unequal treatment in the Japanese leading to the latent anxieties and negative emotions remain unaddressed.

Today, current perceptions of Japanese macaques seem to be mixed. Negative perceptions, such as macaques as “pests”, are usually held by rural residents who are directly affected by the macaques, as they feel that the macaques should be permitted to inhabit only the deep mountain areas, but not the forests around human settlements (Enari 2021). They justify their negative perceptions by vocalising the inequalities they experience as a result of macaques, like poor harvests due to attacks, and view them as a dysfunction in their social structure, preventing proper functioning of their daily agricultural operations. The positive perception of macaques are usually held by the urbanized population in Japan, whose attitude is usually influenced by media, rather than first-hand experience (Kishioka et al., 2011). They tend to advocate against macaque killings and disapprove of people carrying out the killings. However, the majority seem to hold an attitude of indifference towards the macaque problem, with the majority being rural populations unaffected by the problem, who rarely cooperate towards the resolution of the issue (Nakamura et al., 2013). As such, in most cases, only rural residents who are affected by the macaque problem conduct macaque management. This is reflected in the governmental social structure, where it is mainly local and regional governments implementing policies and handling the macaque problem, while the national government only provides guidance and funding, remaining relatively uninvolved. From a conflict theorist perspective, due to the limited geographical scope of the problem, the population is unequally impacted, where only a minority is directly impacted, thus the power majority who are unaffected by the problem are hesitant to get involved, leading to the continual existence of the problem and difficulty in resolving it.

These perceptions are also partially responsible for influencing responses to the Japanese macaque problem. The perception of “pests” and “nuisances” can lead to responses focused on controlling or reducing the Japanese macaques due to the associated negative stereotypes with those labels. A “pest” is a term usually used to label things like wasps or cockroaches. These organisms are creatures that harm crops, livestock, or cause a nuisance to people, and people tend to view them with negative emotions and violence. Thus, when the same label is put onto macaques, they would tend to be subjected to the same stigma associated with “pests”, possibly as a convenient means of alleviating anger and anguish of the people in response to the numerous attacks, and policies involving reducing or controlling the population may be implemented based on the associated label. Policies involving reducing the macaque population can be seen via culling programs, where local governments often resort to capturing or culling macaques identified as causing significant crop damage, in order to return society to proper functioning. Over 2,500 macaques are captured annually in some regions under these programs (Fujisaki et al., 1986). In line with the associated label of “pests” these policies display violence and disdain of the Japanese towards the Japanese macaque population, and prioritize fulfilling goals of elimination and control over protection and conservation of macaques. This could create dissatisfaction among the people who prioritize conservation, possibly leading to social movements like protests which could disrupt social stability.

Additionally, such policies could also be implemented with focus on McDonaldized values, which are commonly integrated into many modern societies(Ritzer, George. (Ed.),2002). In such cases, government bodies prioritize efficiency when implementing policies, as the rapid and quick elimination of macaques is prioritized so that the problem that they pose to the agricultural industry and the workforce in affected regions can be protected and return to proper function as quickly as possible. However, this could lead to the problem of rationality vs irrationality. While the culling solution could be rational by the government due to its focus on quick solution of the problem given their available resources and knowledge. However, the solution could also prove irrational. Critics have pointed out that while such policies may prove effective, issues arise about over-culling and potential local extinctions(Enari & Enari, 2016), severely threatening the ecosystem in the area. Japanese macaques play an important role in forest ecosystems, via aiding in seed dispersal and maintaining plant diversity. Over-culling can disrupt these ecological services, potentially leading to long-term environmental changes that might indirectly affect agriculture(Enari & Enari, 2016). Moreover, removing large numbers of macaques can fragment social groups and force surviving macaques to change their behavior, often leading to more concentrated and persistent crop raiding by smaller groups, and the increased frequency and aggression could lead to more civilians or farmers getting attacked and hurt(Morimitsu, 2023). Thus, the culling solution may be irrational as by trying to efficiently solve the problem through culling of macaques in order to protect the functioning of the agricultural industry, governments risk over-culling which could further damage the agricultural industry and endanger the local workforce.

On the other hand, positive perceptions like macaques being “culturally and ecologically significant” can lead to policies focused on protection of macaques, while still tackling the problems macaques pose to Japanese society. The positive perception means that policies may be better suited to find policies that can reduce macaque attacks while still protecting the species, rather than implementing policies influenced by negative emotions and violence. Measures in the Hyogo Prefecture reflect an ideal outcome of how through a multi-faceted approach by implementing monkey patrols, using electric fences, and selectively capturing problematic individuals can effectively mitigate agricultural damage while keeping a stable macaque population(Morimitsu, 2023). From a functionalist perspective, the macaques are heavily integrated into the social structures of these regions, be it in agriculture, housing, and other related areas with macaques. As such, adopting a multi-faceted approach allows the governments of such regions to balance this relationship and allows society to continue to function while controlling the macaque population and problem without causing dysfunction.

In conclusion, Japanese macaques are perceived in both positive and negative light. The positive perceptions include its value as an economic boon and important for

ecological stability, and through these perceptions, society reacts accordingly such as implementing effective policies and raising awareness of the importance of macaques to allow for proper functioning of society. Moreover, macaques also are perceived as having religious value by some, allowing them to cope with latent anxieties from societal pressures as well as promote social cohesion, so as to not disrupt society. Other Japanese view macaques in a negative light, as “pests” and compromises the safety of citizens and disrupts the agricultural sector, leading to policies which are focused on culling macaques. While such approaches may deal with the problem in the short run, it may risk causing dysfunction in the long run. Furthermore, the unequal impact of the problem leads to a lack of proper attention to the problem arising from the indifference of the unaffected Japanese, compromising efforts at resolution.

Additionally, one can consider if the Macaques should have a right to the city. Due to rapid urbanization, macaques have been slowly forced out of their homes in the forest and have to exist within close proximity to Japanese society, raising ethical concerns if it is fair to then cull or “punish” them when complications with humans result. Moreover, if close contact with humans is unavoidable, then perhaps efforts at integration rather than containment or elimination may be favourable. A consensus needs to be reached before the problem can be effectively solved.

[2200 words]

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