

Valuable Lessons from Monkeys

Saki
second grader Hyogo, Japan



Built 40 years ago on a mountainside on an Inland Sea island, the Awajishima Monkey Center provides food for 180 wild monkeys. The monkeys arrive at the Center around nine o'clock in the morning and stay until they go back up the mountain around five in the afternoon.

The Center is run by the Nobuhara family. Nobuhara Saki has become very friendly with the monkeys, and her relationship with the monkeys has been featured numerous times on television, their heartwarming interaction leaving a deep impression with viewers. For this issue, we talked to Saki and her parents.

Q: When did you start playing with the monkeys? What do you do together?

Saki: I probably started playing with them when I was one. I've been with monkeys for as long as I can remember. We splash each other with water, or see who can find nuts the fastest. We look for nuts that Mom hides, and I usually win. That's because I'm always secretly watching where Mom's hiding the stuff . . . [laughs]. It's fun to play with the monkeys, but what I like best is feeding the babies.

Q: Most of the monkeys here have names, but can you tell them all apart? Who names them?

Saki: Yeah, I know who most of them are. I can tell because their faces are different. When a baby monkey is born, Mom or Dad or I give it a name. I've given them names like "Ribbon" and "Cake." I like all the monkeys and think they're cute, even if I've named them or not.



Saki and Tororo. Saki sometimes quarrel with him, but they are very close. Tororo doesn't mind Saki touching his face. He is the only one that will let her touch him like that.

Mother: Saki is the best at telling the monkeys apart. We didn't teach her how; she just figured it out on her own.

Q: What was the best thing that's ever happened to you with the monkeys?

Saki: It was when I held a baby monkey when I was five. The baby's mother was right behind it, but it was so cute that I picked up the baby.

Father: Usually, mother monkeys get really upset if a human being touches their babies. Not just the mother, but also the other monkeys would normally get upset. But since Saki's been around them since she was young and she's still small, they probably just let it go. There have been other occasions when I feel that the monkeys are more generous towards Saki than they are with other people.

Mother: Saki looked so happy when she held that baby monkey in her arms. She held on to it for a pretty long time. Also, she seemed to be really happy when Tororo let her touch him for the first time during a television shoot. When I saw the footage, Saki just had the most satisfied look on her face. Wild monkeys usually don't let people touch them.

Q: What was the saddest thing that's ever happened?

Saki: I was taking a walk with Grandma when I was six, and there was a dead female monkey about 50 cm long. I think she fell from a tree or was attacked by a dog. Dad buried her. It was really sad. Also, when I was seven, I was looking for nuts with Dad to give to the monkeys, when we found a monkey skull. The skull was just lying there. I was really shocked. I dug a grave for it.

Father: At the time, Saki didn't really show how she felt. She doesn't like to expose her weaknesses to others, and has a tendency to act strong. But seeing that she made a grave for the skull, I think she experienced some shock. It's not often that we confront a monkey's death, because they don't die at the feeding stations. Now, when monkeys that used to come for food stop coming, Saki may not think much of it. Eventually, though, she'll realize that not coming for food means that they've died. How



The first time Saki held a week-old baby monkey in her arms.

will she deal with that fact, and how will she overcome it? It's an important lesson to learn, but I'm a bit worried.

There are a lot of malformed monkeys on this mountain, and about 30 of the 180 monkeys have some sort of abnormality. Around the time the Center first opened, the first director, Saki's grandfather, found a monkey carrying a baby monkey that had been born without any limbs. Witnessing the mother monkey almost drop the baby from a tree from exhaustion, since she had had to hold the baby all the time, Saki's grandfather decided to raise the baby himself, naming it Kota. In memory of Kota, a statue of him was built and placed at the Center.

Q: Do you know about Kota? There are a lot of monkeys here without legs, but what do you think about that?

Saki: I think Grandpa was a great person to raise Kota himself. But when I heard about him, I was worried that Kota might not be able to make friends because his mother didn't raise him.

Father: Saki doesn't see monkeys with abnormalities as any different from the other ones. I think it's normal for her not to see them as special. The monkeys here accommodate those that have disabilities, changing their behaviors and lifestyles accordingly, like by dropping their pace when moving from one place to another. Monkey societies function well. A hierarchy definitely exists, but the stronger monkeys help the weaker ones. They don't cut them off or abandon them. The monkeys with abnormalities are a part of their pack, their society. In that sense, I feel like there's more merit to the way monkeys operate in packs than people do in society.

Q: Does your association with the monkeys every day make you think about anything in particular, Saki?

Saki: Nothing in particular! It's just ordinary for me.

Q: What do you, Mr. and Mrs. Nobuhara, want Saki to learn from her daily interactions with monkeys?

Father: There isn't anything specific that I want her to learn. Saki has had experiences that not many children have, but I don't know if it's been a good thing. But I do think that it hasn't really been a bad thing. She knows from experience what it means to



The monkey all come when Saki calls out, "Boss! Boss!" Her job at the Center is to feed monkeys and change their water.

go through life helping each other. She doesn't say much, but through her actions I can tell that she's thinking about a lot of different things. Like when she buried that monkey skull. Or when witnessing births, which happen a lot, Saki has the most serious expression on her face. And when other people become too excited, she'll ask them to quiet down.

Mother: I don't have anything specific in mind that I want her to learn, either. I think she'll learn what she needs to know naturally. She might reject our suggestions if we try to direct her learning in a certain direction.



There are sometimes news stories about monkeys causing trouble in residential areas and snatching bags from tourists, so some people are under the impression that wild monkeys are dangerous and a nuisance. However, the monkeys at Awajishima Monkey Center are all very quiet. When people approach them, they seem neither intimidated nor intimidating. The Center has a rule that visitors cannot feed the monkeys or have any visible food with them without authorization from the Center management. When people feed the monkeys, they themselves must enter a cage and feed monkeys peanuts that they've bought on the spot. Since the monkeys have learned that they will be fed only by people in cages, they do not beg people outside cages for food. Nobuhara Kazutoshi, Saki's father, says, "My hope is that through media coverage of Saki, people will learn our way of interacting with monkeys, and change their prejudices toward wild monkeys. I also hope that this will help people to think more deeply about the plight of wild monkeys, nature, and each other." He continues, "The original thinking behind the Center was to feed the monkeys in one place, thereby preventing them from damaging people's farms. Of course, it's much better not to have to feed wild monkeys at all. But right now, it's not possible to return them to the wild. The mountain is not safe for monkeys to live on their own . . . Hopefully one day, humans will have to go deep into the mountains to get even a glimpse of a wild monkey."



This cage is for the people, who are feeding the monkeys outside.