CHAPTER FOUR

WORKING WITH MONKEYS

This chapter looks at the people who run the monkey parks and work with the monkeys day in, day out. The first section outlines the staffing arrangements found in the parks, the nature of the job of park worker, and the range of duties that staff are called on to perform. The second section focuses on the key duty of park staff: feeding the monkeys. It describes both the general process of food handling and the system of regular feeding times through which the food is distributed to the monkeys. But park workers are also called on to maintain order in the park environment. The third section examines the role of staff in policing the interface between monkeys and visitors. Staff accord top priority to visitor safety and to this end spend much of their time overseeing visitor–monkey interactions. The final section looks at staff knowledge of the monkeys. It outlines the skills that staff require in dealing with the monkeys, including the ability to recognize them individually, and describes the close relationships that can develop between staff and monkeys.

Working in the Park

Compared with zoos, monkey parks are generally small-scale enterprises that employ just a few people. A survey of 25 parks carried out in 1979 found that the number of ‘caretakers’ ranged from one to 13, at an average of five per park (Izawa 1979: 76). This same survey showed that more than a quarter of the parks (7 out of 25) had just one or two caretakers (ibid.: 76). This caretaker figure is not necessarily the same as the number of employees, for parks (especially the larger ones) may employ other people to do jobs such as selling tickets at the entrance, overseeing the car park, and more generally responding to the needs of visitors outside the monkey area. In addition, the Takasakiyama park has office staff responsible for accounts, for personnel issues, and for handling telephone inquiries from the public. In the Iwatayama park at Arashiyama there are usually three or four people on duty at any one time, including
someone at the park entrance at the foot of the mountain overseeing the sale of tickets from a vending machine, someone in the visitors’ building up at the feeding station selling monkey feed to visitors, and one or two people working in the grounds of the feeding station itself.

Some parks are family-run businesses. In a number of cases, the men who established the parks have, upon retirement, passed on managerial responsibility to their sons. For example, Asaba Shinsuke succeeded his father Asaba Nobuo in running the Iwatayama park and Nobuhara Toshikazu succeeded his stepfather Nakahashi Minoru in running the Awajishima park. Some parks are owned by local associations of tourist businesses, which sub-contract the running of the park to others. Other parks are run by municipalities. The Takasakiyama park was set up by Ōita City Hall (as we have seen) and is staffed by municipal employees who enjoy the range of benefits, including long-term job security, that local government employees in Japan normally enjoy. Other municipalities subcontract the running of the park to individuals hired on renewable short-term contracts.

In small, remote parks that get relatively few visitors, the entire running of the park may be left to just a single person, who is expected to do everything: feed the monkeys, sell tickets (and food) to visitors, oversee visitor–monkey interactions, field telephone inquiries, clear up after the monkeys, keep the park tidy, and make repairs (to buildings and paths) in the park grounds, and so on. At busy times the lone worker attends to visitors out in the feeding station, while at other times, when there are few or no visitors about, he does indoor jobs such as preparing monkey food or catching up with paperwork. This was the case with the Ōdōyama park (on the island of Shikoku) when I visited it in the autumn of 2004. The man on duty divided his time between collecting the admission charge from visitors, preparing bags of monkey feed (for visitors to give out to the monkeys), dispensing food to the monkey troop, standing in the feeding station talking to visitors about the monkeys, and checking on the whereabouts of particular monkeys in the nearby forest.

Some parks are run by a husband and wife team. In this situation there tends to be a division of labour, with the wife selling tickets at the park entrance and the husband working in the feeding station, overseeing the monkeys. This was well illustrated by the Isegatani park (up until its closure in 2001). In the 1990s the Tsubaki Hot-