CHAPTER EIGHT

RESTORING THE MONKEYS

This chapter examines ideas and initiatives aimed at restoring the wild character of the monkeys. As a result of their increasing detachment from the forest, park monkeys appear significantly less natural than their unprovisioned counterparts, calling into question the park’s claim to be a ‘natural zoo’. This challenge to the legitimacy of the monkey park forms the background to calls for reform. Discussion of park reform typically focuses on the theme of resituated the monkey viewing experience away from the park and towards the forest. The first section of this chapter looks at an example of what I call forest-edge display, while the second section examines the more radical idea of siting the monkey viewing experience in the forest itself and discusses the various questions that this proposed reform raises. The third section describes another example of forest display—this time unconnected with the parks—known as ‘monkeywatching’. In the final part of the chapter, I consider the limits to the proposed restoration of the wild character of the monkeys by looking at aspects of park monkey behaviour not addressed in the reforms.

Forest-edge Display

Educating the public has not been a top priority in Japan’s monkey parks. By and large, the parks have been run as tourist businesses. The monkey park is an institution that uses food to attract monkeys to a central place to which the presence of the monkeys in turn attracts paying visitors. The profit motive has been present in the monkey park sector right from the outset, as we saw in Chapter 3 when Ueda Tamotsu was inspired to provision the monkey troop at Takasakiyama in the hope of creating a lucrative tourist attraction for the city of Oita. Once it was up and running, the Takasakiyama park soon started to draw great crowds and make large profits. Such was its success that it became known as a ‘treasure mountain’ and inspired others elsewhere to copy its business model and set up their own parks. Not everyone was comfortable with this commercial approach to running the parks.
In a memorable phrase, Wada Kazuo wrote in the 1980s that some parks see the monkey as nothing more than a *satsutaba o seotta dōbutsu* or ‘an animal with bundles of bank notes on its back’ (Wada 1989: 5). His point was that for the people who run such parks, monkeys were really no more than a lucrative resource to be exploited, a means of making money by entertaining the public, and that they had little, if any, interest in tapping the potential of the monkeys to educate the visiting public.

Yet there are monkey parks that take education seriously as an institutional objective and commit themselves to the cause of teaching their visitors about, as well as entertaining them with, the monkeys. In Chapter 4 I drew a distinction between minimalist parks that do little more than assemble monkeys for visitors to watch and extended parks that go further and represent the monkeys in certain ways. The latter typically claim to go beyond showing monkeys to visitors and make an effort to inform the public about the monkeys. Prime examples would be the Takasakiyama and Iwatayama parks. Staff in these parks tell visitors basic facts about the monkeys, teach visitors how to identify individual monkeys, and offer explanations of monkey society and ecology. Most monkey parks do not do these things, but even the minimalist parks would claim to be more than simply places of entertainment. The kind of reasoning behind such a claim is that the monkey park, located as it is in the mountain zone, is a place that offers the visiting public the chance to experience first-hand ‘wild monkeys’ in their natural habitat in a way that is impossible in the zoo.

However, as we saw in Chapter 7, the natural status of the monkey park and the wild status of its monkeys do not go unchallenged. The parks are, formally, *yaen kōen* or ‘wild monkey parks’, and to the extent that the ‘wild’ status of the monkeys is equated with non-captivity, the monkeys may continue to appear ‘wild’. But, like the zoo, the monkey park is open to the criticism that it displaces its animals. Critics argue that provisioning has made the monkeys dependent on food handouts and reduced their foraging in the forest, as a result of which the claim that park monkeys still live in their natural habitat no longer rings true. To recall the fishing analogy used by park staff, monkey parks supposedly ‘fish’ monkeys out of the forest into the feeding station clearing and then return them to the forest at the end of the day. In this way, the park claims to preserve the monkeys’ connection with the forest and therefore the possibility that the forest can continue to be ‘fished’, day in, day out, in the future. But for critics, the long-