

READING CHALLENGE

How Cats Took Over an Island

A tiny Japanese island with more cats than people

Level	A2 — Elementary
--------------	-----------------

Age Group	Teens (11-16)
------------------	---------------

Topic	True Stories
--------------	--------------

Duration	~10 min read
-----------------	--------------

Skill	Reading
--------------	---------

Imagine a place where cats are everywhere. They sit on walls. They sleep on the road. They walk into houses like they own them. This place is real. It is called Aoshima, and it is a tiny **island** in the south of Japan. Aoshima is one of the most unusual places in the world. There are only a few people living here, but there are more than 200 cats. The cats are the real owners of this island.

A Small Island in the Sea

Aoshima is in Ehime Prefecture, in the southern part of Japan. The island is very small — only about 1.6 kilometres long and 0.3 kilometres wide. You can walk around the whole island in less than one hour. There are no shops, no restaurants, and no cars. There is no hotel. There is not even a vending machine. The only way to get there is by a small boat from the town of Nagahama. The boat makes only two trips a day, and it can carry about 35 **passengers**.

When the boat arrives at the small **harbour**, visitors see something surprising. Dozens of cats are waiting at the port. They sit on the rocks. They walk along the wall. Some of them run towards the boat because they know that visitors sometimes bring food. It is a very strange and wonderful welcome.

How Did the Cats Get There?

The story begins many years ago. In the 1940s and 1950s, Aoshima was a busy fishing village. About 900 people lived on the island. Fishermen went out every day to catch fish in the sea around the island. But there was a problem — mice. Mice were everywhere. They ate the fish that the fishermen kept in their boats and in their **shelters** near the harbour. So the fishermen brought cats to the island to catch the mice.

The cats did their job well. They caught many mice. But nobody thought about what would happen next. The cats had kittens. The kittens grew up and had more kittens. There was plenty of fish to eat, so the cats were healthy and strong. The cat **population** grew quickly. Year after year, there were more and more cats on the little island.

The People Left, the Cats Stayed

While the number of cats was growing, the number of people was getting smaller. Life on a small island is not easy. There is no hospital, no high school, and very few jobs. Young people wanted more opportunities, so they moved to bigger cities on the mainland. Slowly, the **residents** of Aoshima left, one family at a time.

By 2015, only about 15 people still lived on the island. Most of them were elderly — over 65 years old. But the cats were still there. Nobody took the cats when they moved away. The animals became **strays** — cats without owners. With so few people and so many cats, the island changed. The cats began to go everywhere. They slept in empty houses. They sat on the rooftops. They played in the abandoned school building. Aoshima was no longer a village for people. It was a village for cats.

Cat Island Becomes Famous

For a long time, very few people knew about Aoshima. But in 2013 and 2014, some visitors took photos of the cats and shared them on social media. The pictures went viral. People around the world saw images of this tiny island covered in cats, and they wanted to visit. Aoshima became known as "Cat Island."

Suddenly, **tourists** started coming. The small boat from Nagahama, which was usually almost empty, was now full every day. People came from Tokyo, Osaka, and even from other countries — the United States, France, South Korea, Australia. They all wanted to see the famous cats of Aoshima. They took hundreds of photos. They posted videos online. Some cats became internet celebrities, with thousands of followers on social media.

The **attention** was good in some ways. People sent food and donations to help care for the cats. **Volunteers** came to the island to **feed** the animals and check their health. The cats were not wild or aggressive. Most of them were very **gentle** and friendly. They liked to sit on visitors' laps and be stroked. Their calm **behaviour** made them even more popular.

Problems in Paradise

But the fame also brought problems. Too many tourists on a tiny island created difficulties. The few elderly residents did not always enjoy the crowds. Some visitors left rubbish on the island. Others tried to take cats home with them, which was not allowed. The island had no toilets for visitors, no place to buy food, and no rubbish bins. Everything that tourists brought, they needed to take back with them on the boat.

There was a bigger problem too. Having so many cats in one small place was not healthy for the animals. Some cats were sick. There was not always enough food for all of them. Kittens were born every year, and the population kept growing. Animal welfare groups said that the cats needed veterinary care — check-ups, vaccinations, and medical treatment.

In 2018, a big programme began. Vets came to the island and gave many of the cats a special operation so they could not have more kittens. This was to control the population. They also checked the cats for diseases and gave them medicine. The goal was to make life better for the cats that were already there, while slowly reducing the total number. By 2023, the cat population had dropped from over 200 to about 130.

Rules for Visitors

Today, Aoshima has **rules** for visitors. You must not bring dogs to the island. You must not leave rubbish behind. You must not pick up or take any cats. You should bring your own food and water because there are no shops. And you must catch the last boat back — there is nowhere to sleep on the island.

Many visitors say that Aoshima is a magical experience. You step off the boat, and cats come to greet you. You walk along quiet paths between old houses, and cats follow you. You sit down on a bench, and a cat jumps onto your lap. It is peaceful and strange at the same time. There is no noise from traffic, no music, no advertising — just the sound of the sea and the soft sound of cats.

Other Cat Islands

Aoshima is the most famous, but it is not the only "cat island" in Japan. There are about a dozen islands across the country where cats outnumber people. Tashirojima, in Miyagi Prefecture, is another well-known one. The fishermen there also brought cats to catch mice, and now about 100 cats live on the island. There is even a cat shrine — a small temple where people pray for good fishing, because they believe cats bring good luck.

In Japanese culture, cats have always been special. The "maneki-neko" — the waving cat statue you see in shops and restaurants — is a symbol of good luck and good business. So perhaps it is not surprising that Japan is the country with the most cat islands in the world.

What Will Happen Next?

The future of Aoshima is uncertain. The few remaining residents are very old. When they are gone, there will be no people left on the island. Who will look after the cats then? Some animal groups have already made plans to continue caring for the cats even after the last person leaves. Volunteers visit regularly to bring food and medicine.

Some of the old buildings on the island are falling apart. Roofs have holes. Walls are cracking. Nature is slowly taking back the land. Trees grow through broken windows. Grass covers the old paths. One day, the houses might **destroy** themselves, falling down piece by piece. But the cats will probably still be there — sleeping in the sun, walking along the harbour wall, and waiting for the next boat to arrive.

Aoshima is a reminder that animals can surprise us. A few cats brought to catch mice turned into hundreds. A forgotten fishing village became one of the most famous islands in the world. And a place that people left behind became a home that cats will never leave.

Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	island	a piece of land with water all around it
2	harbour	a safe area of water near the land where boats can stop
3	passenger	a person who travels in a bus, train, boat, or plane
4	resident	a person who lives in a particular place
5	stray	an animal that has no home or owner
6	population	the number of people or animals living in a place
7	destroy	to damage something so badly that it cannot be used again
8	tourist	a person who visits a place for fun or holiday
9	feed	to give food to a person or animal
10	shelter	a place that protects you from bad weather or danger
11	behaviour	the way a person or animal acts
12	gentle	kind and calm; not rough or violent
13	rule	something you must or must not do
14	attention	when you look at or listen to something carefully
15	volunteer	a person who works without being paid, to help others

Comprehension Quiz

1. Where is Aoshima island?

- A) In the north of Japan, near Hokkaido
- B) In the south of Japan, in Ehime Prefecture
- C) Near Tokyo, in Tokyo Bay
- D) In the middle of the Pacific Ocean

2. Why did fishermen first bring cats to Aoshima?

- A) Because they wanted pets for their children
- B) Because cats are lucky animals in Japan
- C) Because they needed cats to catch mice on their fishing boats
- D) Because a law said every island must have cats

3. What happened to the human population of Aoshima over the years?

- A) It grew bigger because of the cats
- B) It stayed the same — about 900 people
- C) It got much smaller because young people moved away
- D) It disappeared completely in 2010

4. What is one rule for tourists visiting Aoshima?

- A) They must buy a cat before they leave
- B) They must not bring dogs to the island
- C) They must stay for at least two nights
- D) They must wear special shoes

5. What problem did the large number of cats cause?

- A) The cats attacked the tourists
- B) The cats ate all the fish in the sea
- C) There were too many cats and not enough food or care for all of them
- D) The cats destroyed all the buildings on the island

Answer Key

Q	Answer	Question
1	B	Where is Aoshima island?
2	C	Why did fishermen first bring cats to Aoshima?
3	C	What happened to the human population of Aoshima over the years?
4	B	What is one rule for tourists visiting Aoshima?
5	C	What problem did the large number of cats cause?