

It's a dog's life: purity the key for treasured S.Korean breed

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The medium-sized hunting dog comes from the island of the same name, a remote rural community off the peninsula's south coast.

Visitors are greeted by signboards and statues of the eponymous canine, known for its fierce loyalty, and live ones stand guard outside homes or peek out from doghouses.

But its bucolic appearance belies the rigid canine apartheid it imposes on the animals.

Any dog that cannot prove its pedigree, or that fails to come up to standard, is immediately exiled, and any coming onto the island—even a returning Jindo—must have official permission, and be neutered.

"We protect the breed by not letting registered [dogs](#) off the island and not allowing others in without a government permit," said Cha Jae-Nam, who heads the Jindo Dog Research and Test Centre.

The dogs have been bred for centuries, and Seoul classified them as a National Treasure in 1962. Now Cha's state-run centre spends two billion won (US\$1.75 million) a year on what he calls a "systematic and scientific" preservation of purebred Jindos.

"It's not common for people to conduct a paternity test on their newborns, but we do for all puppies at birth," he told AFP.

"They are given a birth certificate if they match the DNA of their parents, but if they don't, they must leave the island."

The emphasis echoes widespread notions about racial purity in South Korea, an unusually homogenous society where the population is around 96 percent ethnically Korean, and mixed-race relationships are frowned upon in some quarters.

South Korea's canine national treasure



Source: Jindo Dog Research and Test Centre/AFP Photo/Ed Jones

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Map locating Jindo island in South Korea, home of a purebreed dog classed as a national treasure

But even unquestionable genetics do not ensure survival for the dogs.

When a puppy reaches six months of age, it must undergo a strict assessment of the shape of its ears, legs, tail and head to be microchipped and join the 6,000-odd registered National Treasure status Jindos on the island.

Any that fail are removed.

The rigorous controls enable Cha to declare confidently: "All Jindo dogs in Jindo county are purebred."

Animal dignity

Jindos have been adored by South Korean leaders, with Kim Dae-Jung giving a breeding pair to the North during his "Sunshine Policy" of the early 2000s, and others enjoying pampered lives at the Blue House under the country's two most recent presidents Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye.

But Park came under fire when she was ejected from office by a court order in March and notoriously left her nine dogs behind—bringing more attention to the rules surrounding them.

Critics such as Chae Il-Taek, director of the Korean Animal Welfare Association, say preservation of the breed should not come at the cost of "discrimination that undermines the dignity of the animals".

The obsession over the "pure" Jindo bloodline meant some breeders abandon puppies that fail to meet the criteria—which often end up on meal tables, he said.

South Koreans are believed to consume somewhere between 1.5 and 2.5 million dogs every year, according to animal rights groups, although the number is in decline with dwindling demand among the younger generation.



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"A large number of the dogs kicked out from Jindo are sold off to dog meat farmers," Chae said.

'Deformities in humans'

In a fluorescent-lit lab at the test centre, researcher Kim Jong-Seok proudly opens a double-door fridge containing rows of blood vials.

Officials say the facility has DNA samples of all Jindo dogs born on the island and Kim, who has studied the breed for two decades, believes the meticulous controls are necessary to keep the Jindos clean and healthy.

"The inbreeding of royal families has led to many deformities in humans," Kim said. "As such, we are preventing various diseases and deformities."

The measures are welcomed by Jindo breeders, who can sell purebred puppies for around US\$1,000 each.

"Procedures like the screening are inconvenient and tedious at times but we don't complain because it leads to production income," said Lim Tae-Young, who heads an association of some 70 Jindo breeders on the island.

"It's not to say the dogs kicked off the island are bad and the ones that remain are good," he said, a handful of playful puppies wagging their tails at his feet.

"But here, we only have purebred Jindos."

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