

## **The Online Citizen**

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### **Look Back at 2011: Animal Welfare**

*by Gangasudhan*

The animal welfare scene in Singapore has been burgeoning in the last few years, and there is little argument that 2011 especially has been a year of milestones for animal welfare – and advocacy as a whole.

#### **Hopping Mad about Rabbits!**

In January, as the Year of the Rabbit was about to be ushered in, the House Rabbit Society of Singapore (HRSS) and Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) both issued cautionary statements advising the public not to be swayed by impulse and engage in the purchase of live rabbits to welcome the Chinese New Year. But in spite of this caution, two rabbit exhibitions were nevertheless carried out at Harbourfront and Suntec City, including the open display of live rabbits for members of public to handle and photograph (with flash) causing much distress to the docile animals. Many rabbits in the exhibition at the Suntec City Atrium were also observed to have been housed in small wire cages and in grill-bottom pens. SPCA followed up on reports from animal lovers and wrote in to AVA, which in turn advised the organisers to improve the conditions for the rabbits. Fortunately, the organisers decided to cancel unsavoury contests and competitions they had planned – including a rabbit race.

#### **Fin-less in Singapore**

Another key initiative in anticipation of Chinese New Year was a move by Project: FIN – a local marine conservation group, to promote and encourage those celebrating Chinese New Year to exclude shark's fin soup. With 26 to 73 million sharks a year being inhumanely finned, the damage to the marine eco-system is massive, in addition to the cruelty to sharks. Eaten for merely the symbolic and cultural reasons during festive occasions, Project: FIN worked closely with several animal welfare groups and various media platforms to increase awareness about shark finning and promoting the use of mock shark fin's soup. This included offering samples of mock shark's fin soup to the public and showcasing footage of shark-finning. With Chinese New Year 2012 around the corner, this might be something to consider as we move forward into the new year.

#### **Voicing Out for the Voiceless**

A truly historic milestone in the local animal welfare scene happened in June 2011 when Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES) together with Chong Pang CC organised the

inaugural Public Forum on Animal Welfare Policies. Headed by Mr Louis Ng, executive director of ACRES, and Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law, animal lovers and advocates used this opportunity to highlight concerns of animal welfare advocates in Singapore including everyday issues such as culling of strays, dog trapping, puppy mills, as well as more pressing concerns such as dolphins in captivity and shark finning. The event was well received with about 400 people turning out to provide feedback and seek redress on queries.

### **Swimming Free**

Perhaps the most extensively discussed, headline-grabbing and even somewhat militant animal advocacy issue would be the ACRES campaign to free 25 bottlenose dolphins that were purchased by Resorts World, Sentosa (RWS) to be part of its Marine Life Park. Launched in May, the campaign to 'Save the World's Saddest Dolphins' argues that these free-roaming wild dolphins would not thrive in captivity (two of the initial 27 dolphins that were purchased has already died in captivity). The advocacy extended to undercover investigation by the ACRES team to expose the unsuitable

conditions – such as not meeting minimum pool dimensions, failure to provide shelter, being located next to a high boat-traffic location and rusty enclosures – that the dolphins had been kept in Langkawi, Malaysia for training. As a result of this revelation, RWS moved all the dolphins to a training facility in the Philippines.

Courting some controversy, ACRES came under criticism by RWS for cyber harassment when the latter's Facebook page was inundated with appeals and calls to free the dolphins by animal lovers and concerned members of public. ACRES clarified that it had only asked supporters to petition for the release of the dolphins and to stay civil with the posts, and the group pointed out that RWS did not respond to any of these posts.

The momentum of the movement for this particular cause led to a concert in August at Speaker's Corner, which featured several prominent bands and musicians with a turnout of over 1,000 people. This was followed by a public dialogue session in October with Mr Ric O'Barry – a renowned former dolphin trainer who became a passionate dolphin activist – at the Grand Copthorne Hotel where another strong turnout was witnessed. Separately, during his visit, Mr O'Barry made an attempt to personally meet the CEO of RWS but was declined.

The issue has not been resolved and ACRES has vowed to continue the campaign and generate large-scale awareness until a viable solution can be reached that ensures the well-being of the 'World's Saddest Dolphins'.

### **Chong Pang to the Rescue Again**

Perhaps one of the most unexpected developments was witnessed in October, when the Ministry of National Development (MND) announced that it would undertake a review of its policy on cat ownership in Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, while urging the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) to relook its stray culling policy. The announcement was made as a

pilot cat feeding programme was launched in Chong Pang constituency to centralise stray cat feeding to specified vicinities that minimised mess and inconvenience for other residents (40 feeding stations have been planned for the neighbourhood).

Meanwhile, residents in the Chong Pang ward were polled to establish that 85% were against cat culling, which then opened the door to a sterilisation-only approach (i.e. zero culling) to be instituted there – to date, 31 cats have been sterilised under this programme. A pilot HDB cat ownership programme is also in the pipeline for residents of Chong Pang which would entail each resident officially registering the ownership of his or her cat with HDB.

### **For the Love of a Cat and Dogs**

The close of the year saw localised animal welfare incidents to surface – such as the November case of a cat being callously dumped into a bin outside a vet's clinic. Fortunately, CCTV footage outside the clinic caught the whole scene unfold, which led to an uproar online when scenes of the footage were posted on several websites. The buzz though helped to eventually identify the culprit as someone who was suffering from bipolar disorder and who had been supposed to surrender the cat to the SPCA instead of dumping the cat in a rubbish bin.

Finally, the notorious Punggol stray dog incident in December left many people torn between the safety of joggers and the welfare of the feral dogs, after one jogger was attacked by a pack of stray dogs along Punggol Waterway. When AVA subsequently rounded up about 30 stray dogs in the vicinity and put down those deemed aggressive, animal activists and dog lovers were up in arms. Soon after, many have since been earnestly trying their best to rehome the remaining dogs that have been rescued from the location while, at the same time, petitioning AVA to release the

captured dogs still with the authority. A Facebook page titled 'Penny Low & AVA, give Punggol strays a chance. Stop the massacre' has since been set up which has attracted over 1,500 'likes'.

### **A Year of Consideration**

2011 has been a year where several animal welfare issues have been thrown forward for the public to think about and the public response to these has been largely encouraging. It has been a year for advocates and the society at large to get familiar with one another, and a year for the government to take animal welfare issues that much more seriously than before.

Many of the tangible initiatives instituted this year can only be assessed appropriately next year and current sentiment is that they should achieve their goals. Meanwhile, more people are getting involved and stepping up to address local animal welfare issue within their communities at the micro level. Instances of ad-hoc sterilisation of feral cats and tending to injured animals is on the rise – with the very least being members of the public giving one of the welfare groups a call.

Advocacy groups have also been taking strides to improve their visibility among the public and many people now know more than just of the SPCA. It is likely that 2012 will witness a different type of

development, but it is without a doubt that many of the future policy changes will find their roots in the seeds that were planted across 2011.