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The Animal Police of Singapore

By Harris Ang

Late-night interviews are usually the terrain of prima donna celebrities. But this time, our after-sunset meeting was due to a snake catcher being “on assignment” at 8 p.m. The assignment -- the rescue of a venomous cobra -- was being conducted by Anbarasi “Anbu” Boopal, 27, director of Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) Wildlife Rescue Centre and Wildlife Crime Unit. She did manage to arrive back at Holland Village eventually, unscathed and uninvenomated.

Despite the odd hours and potentially hazardous nature of her job, Anbu loves what she is doing in ACRES. “We don’t get paid a lot and our job can be dangerous sometimes but all the staff and volunteers have that passion to make a difference to help animals,” she says.

For the uninitiated, ACRES is involved in animal welfare by working with the proper authorities and various community groups in Singapore. Based in Jalan Lekar at the far western part of the island, their base of operations includes an animal sanctuary and quarantine zone for rescued animals.

Snaring the smugglers

“Our staff starts the day at nine, feeding and observing the animals in the enclosures. Our animal rescues are spread out through the day, depending on the calls we get. On average, we do about 80 rescues a month,” explains Anbu.

ACRES will then try to release these animals into their natural habitat unless they are injured.

One rescue involved a green iguana found by a member of the public. “We received a call saying that there was a monitor lizard tied to a cage with a rope found in the heartlands. Upon seeing the animal, I realized that it was actually an illegally smuggled green iguana from South America.”

“It did not eat for a week when we took it back to our quarantine zone. We examined its feces to find razor blades. It was feeding on scraps and rubbish after it was abandoned by its owner who was mostly likely bored of it as a pet!” exclaims a distraught Anbu.

These situations are what ACRES is trying to eradicate with investigations into illegal animal trafficking. They mainly work on tip-offs from the public and disguise themselves as potential buyers to catch wildlife smugglers.

In another scenario ACRES caught a guy smuggling 1,000 baby star tortoises from India to Singapore in his suitcase "with hardly any breathing room." He was responsible for bringing over 2,000 of the endangered star tortoise babies into the country in the three months prior to being caught.

Education and intervention

ACRES are also working hard with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) outlets to stop the trade of animal parts such as the paws and teeth of tigers and bears. Their "ACRES & STOC Endangered Species-Friendly TCM Labelling Scheme" aims to get TCM practitioners to support the cause by having specially designed labels pasted on their products and at their outlets.

"Education is very important both with our internal staff and the public. Our staff is sent to train with regional NGOs to equip themselves with skills to deal with animal rescues," Anbu says.

She adds, "On top of going to schools for talks, we also visit regional zoos and wildlife enclosures to observe the wellbeing of their animals. These animals can get stressed from the constant attention they get from the public. We usually recommend the zoos help improve the lives of these animals, for instance, by reducing the number of public photography sessions with their animals. The zoo community in Asia has responded very well to our suggestions so far."

If you do know of any cases which requires the intervention of ACRES, you can contact the Wildlife Crime Hotline at +65 9783 7782.