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Singapore animal welfare group is seeking to improve standard of care and treatment in region

By Victoria Vaughan & Grace Chua

ORANG utans smoking cigarettes, bears riding bicycles and elephants in chains - these are how some animals live in South-east Asia's zoos.

At a zoo in Malaysia, a bear had its feet tied to bicycle pedals to train it to perform in a circus show.

At another Malaysian zoo, a wounded female macaque was kept isolated in a cage barely big enough for it to move. It also had no water or shelter.

Such conditions cause animals to inflict self-harm, such as pulling out their fur and exhibiting unnatural behaviour like repeated swaying or pacing.

Currently, there are no universal guidelines on animal care and cage sizes. It is up to each zoo and country to ensure good standards of care.

One zoo often cited by animal activists for the substandard living conditions of its animals is the state zoo of Surabaya, Indonesia.

According to Mr Budi Mulyanto, a manager at the zoo, just 2 per cent of the 20 billion rupiah (S\$3 million) zoo revenue from gate receipts is spent annually on nutrition supplements and food for the animals.

In Cambodia, the government raided Angkor Zoo in 2007 and shut it down because of poor conditions. All the animals were relocated to a rescue centre.

Singapore animal welfare group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) is working to improve the situation here, in Thailand and Malaysia.

It conducted workshops for governments, zoos and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) overseas in March to help them monitor conditions and improve animal welfare.

Acres executive director Louis Ng is hopeful that the days of bad zoos are numbered: 'Attitudes of governments and communities are changing. A case of a tiger being drugged and used for photo shoots at A'Famosa Zoo in Malaysia sparked protests and a new law passed at the start of this month gives the government greater powers,' he said, referring to the authorities' ability to regulate zoos.

Following the Acres workshop, four NGOs in Malaysia established myZOO to tackle zoo animal welfare issues there.

In Singapore, Acres has raised concerns about the polar bear enclosures at Singapore Zoo over its small size and the heat from the country's tropical environment, despite the bears' polar habitat.

The zoo said a new enclosure is planned for the polar bears - Sheba, 32 and Inuka, 19 - in the upcoming River Safari. It will be six times bigger than the current one and have a larger pool as well.

The zoo, though, stopped short of granting the NGO's request for the polar exhibit to be phased out.

'One reason we keep polar bears is as an insurance in case something happens in the wild. We can't foresee the future, but it doesn't look positive for polar bears,' explained Ms Fanny Lai, chief executive officer of Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), which runs the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari and Jurong Bird Park.

The challenges of animal welfare in zoos are numerous - not least because when it comes to international standards for zoos, there are none.

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (Waza) comes the closest, with a code of ethics introduced in 2003. Members which do not adhere to it can face suspensions.

However, membership is voluntary and so far, only one zoo, the Giza Zoo in Egypt, has been suspended due to a combination of non-payment of membership fees and inadequate care of animals.

Waza does not police zoos and with only 253 members of an estimated 3,000 zoos and aquariums worldwide, its reach is limited.

Regionally, the South-east Asian Zoos Association, which is based in Indonesia and has 30 members, aims to protect the 'exhibition, conservation and preservation of the earth's fauna in an educational and scientific manner'. But it, too, does not get involved in raising of zoos' standards.

The Singapore Zoo, Night Safari and Jurong Bird Park are members of both.

Acres, based on guidelines from Waza, puts forward the five freedoms for animals in captivity: freedom from hunger and thirst; from thermal and physical discomfort; from injury, disease and pain; from fear and distress; and freedom to express normal behaviours.

As well as adequate care in terms of feeding and enclosures, these freedoms also mean that

circus-style shows, petting sessions and photos with wildlife all go against the grain.

'They turn the animals into entertainment to be laughed at, rather than respected,' said Acres director of education Amy Corrigan.

Often, backstage training for shows involves abuse of animals, such as hitting them to get them to carry out activities they would not normally do.

Elephants going up on their hind legs may be an awesome sight, but it is not a natural one - it causes their anal area to swell, which eventually leads to painful and debilitating hernias.

Zoo architect Ratnakumar Duraisingam from HKS Designer & Consultant has built an enclosure for shows that does not involve human interaction and allows animals to exhibit natural behaviours.

'I wanted to prove there is a way to make NGOs happy and that there can be a compromise,' he said. The show has proven to be a crowd-pleaser at the Khao Kheow open zoo in Chonburi, Thailand, which gets an average of 500 visitors a day.

Orang utans used to break-dance as part of a Singapore Zoo show, but it was phased out in 2003.

It is not just the welfare of animals that is of concern, but that of visitors too.

Cages which have too much access to the animals can lead to accidents, such as 2007's leopard attack at Zoo Negara in Kuala Lumpur.

'Some zoos in Malaysia have bear-petting sessions, or photo sessions with fully grown male macaques. Such things are accidents waiting to happen,' said Ms Corrigan.

She pointed to a good practice in Thailand's Chiang Mai Zoo, where souvenir photos are taken in front of a green screen and images of animals are superimposed onto the pictures.

But Ms Lai believes that contact with animals creates conservationists. At the Singapore Zoo, you can have breakfast with orang utans and your photo taken with a snake or a small wild cat.

'If you don't understand them, it is difficult to love them or have affection,' she said.

'If you look at renowned conservationists, it's close contact with the animals in a safe environment, in a way that does not demean the animal, which inspired them.'

So while NGOs and zoos disagree on the finer points, both agree that bad zoos need to be made extinct. But with a lack of laws, the only way that will happen is if visitors vote with their feet and avoid unethical zoos.

Additional reporting by Amresh Gunasingham