

## Yawning Bread

18 August 2011

### Help my neighbour keeps pythons

“One day, we received a tip-off that a homeowner was keeping exotic animals,” began Louis Ng, Executive Director of Acres, a wildlife protection organisation. “Together with the Agricultural and Veterinary Authority (AVA), we went to a flat in Serangoon and found in the guy’s bedroom green tree pythons, a carpet python, a rainbow boa, bearded dragons, tarantulas . . . altogether eleven animals and seven species.

The largest was the rainbow boa (above) which was as thick as a man’s forearm and about 1.2 metres long. The guy keeping those animals, a Singaporean living with his parents, was fined — and I’ll come to the question of penalties shortly.

Why do people want to keep exotic, often dangerous animals? For sure, it’s got nothing to do with emotional connect; only domestic animals are capable of relating to people. I suspect it’s got something to do with bragging rights: the more dangerous the animal, the more the stupid guy thinks it gives him status and proves his manhood.

“Another tip-off we had was that somebody had dumped polystyrene boxes with tarantulas in them by the roadside,” Louis continued. “Also in the Serangoon area — what’s wrong with Serangoon?”

I shuddered when I saw the picture (above). What if a schoolboy had chanced on the boxes on his way home and opened one out of curiosity?

“Then there was the Burmese python,” Louis recalled. “Someone called and we found it in a park. It was as thick as a man’s calf and longer than my extended arms can reach.”

“But how do you know it was abandoned?” I asked. “Could it not have just wandered from the forest into the park?”

“Burmese pythons are not native to this region. They’re from India. It must have been smuggled in by somebody.”

The problem with keeping trophy animals is precisely because these are trophies and animals. We all get tired of things we collect at some point, or they are crowded off the shelf when newer trophies arrive. Unlike sports trophies or mementoes from our vacations however, animals grow. At some time, either because the mindless collector gets tired of it or the animal has become too big to handle, and the owner wants to get rid of it. But since it is illegal to have kept it in the first place, he has no legal way to dispose of it. The temptation to leave it outside anonymously is great. But that, as you can well imagine, presents a danger to the public.

Our laws are totally inadequate. Section 5 of the Wild Animals and Birds Act, specifies a maximum fine of only \$1,000:

5.—(1) Any person who kills, takes or keeps any wild animal or bird, other than those specified in the Schedule, without a licence shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable

on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$1,000 and to the forfeiture of the wild animal or bird.

What is \$1,000 when someone can be killed by pythons, or for that matter venomous tarantulas?

There's even a huge question whether the law, inadequate as it is, is being enforced properly. Some years ago, the developer of Parc Palais in Bukit Batok decided to keep sharks in a tank next to the swimming pool. They brought in one nurse shark and two black tip sharks. The problem was that the tank they built was not much more than 2 or 3 metres in length, but the sharks grew. Black tip sharks can reach 1 to 1.5 metres while nurse sharks can be 4 metres. In any case, sharks need a lot of space to swim.

So just from an animal welfare angle alone, it was crazy to keep sharks like that. This is in addition to whether the condominium should even have acquired them in the first place.

Acres wrote to AVA. "But they said, 'let's wait for the sharks to get bigger before we consider removing them', " Louis recalled. Later on, they did remove the smaller black tip sharks to a fish farm, but not the bigger nurse shark. As to why they didn't remove the bigger shark, it's not altogether clear; though one suspects it was because AVA themselves had nowhere to shelter it, even temporarily.

"So what became of the nurse shark?" I asked.

"It died. It died from being cramped, because in the end it was longer than the tank and its tail was always bent."

Imagine the suffering.

So it is not just crazy individuals, but even senior management types who have a callous attitude to the welfare of wild animals.

Acres, founded in 2001, is an organisation with charity status concerned with the protection of wildlife. Its vision is a world where animals are treated with compassion and respect

There are six areas of work and focus:

1. Tackling the trade in wildlife;
2. Rescue and rehabilitation of wildlife;
3. Welfare of zoo animals;
4. Cruelty-free living, i.e. aiming for a world without animal testing and cruelty in farming;
5. Human education; and
6. Community outreach.

Louis Ng won the Activism award in the recently concluded Yahoo! Singapore 9, based on an internet poll. Here he is at left receiving the award:

Based in Singapore, Acres is expanding its work to Laos. Partly the move was contingent because there was an issue with bear farming and Acres was called upon to help, but also because in terms of remaining wildlife diversity, Laos is one of the most intact countries in Asean. Intervening now will save a lot for future generations

In a follow-up article, I will be writing about a successful undercover investigation conducted by Acres on the trade in tiger parts, and the campaign to get Resorts World Sentosa — one of our two casinos and integrated resorts — to release the dolphins that had been caught from the Pacific Ocean.