

The Online Citizen

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Focus: Earth – An interview with ACRES

By Howard Lee

Animal protection and welfare is often met with cynicism. People usually find it hard to understand why some would make the effort to help a species other than our own.

Personally, I still get a kick out of the faces I see when I refuse sharks fin soup at dinners – “incredulous”, “man, you don’t know what you are missing” and “what can one man do” would be some apt descriptions. But I still believe that it is in caring for those that cannot fend for themselves that allow us to truly reach into our human compassion.

The Animals Concerns and Research & Education Society, or ACRES, has taken what cynicism there is out there in their stride. Driven by a mission to create a caring and socially responsible society where animals are treated as sentient beings, ACRES has conducted research projects on the use of animals in various fields, and used the findings to educate the public to promote active community involvement in the animal protection movement, as well as strive towards synergistic partnerships with authorities and related parties. The following is an interview with Louis Ng, Executive Director of ACRES.

What do you feel is the most pressing environmental or conservation concern for Singapore? Where have we done well or poorly?

I believe one of the most pressing concerns is curbing the wildlife trade. Singapore has been consistently labelled as a hub for the illegal wildlife trade and some even list Singapore as the top ten illegal wildlife trading hubs in the world.

This is a billion dollar industry that is literally wiping out our wildlife. The trade in wildlife is exceedingly cruel and wasteful and involves millions of individual animals, many of whom are poached from the wild and most are transported in horrendous conditions. Like us, animals feel pain, distress and fear, and it is hard to imagine the immense suffering they go through at the hands of wildlife traders.

For example, in September 2010, an illegal shipment of 523 wild-caught African grey parrots, apparently bound for Singapore, was seized in DR Congo. The birds were transported in appalling conditions and thirty of them have since died.

Most of us are also familiar with the dolphins who will be imported into Singapore soon for the Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) attraction. Twenty-five dolphins were caught from the wild in the Solomon Islands to supply a RWS attraction and, tragically, two have since died.

We must remember that these dolphins, including the two dolphins who died, are sentient individuals who only about a year ago swam freely in the vast open oceans. We need to also consider the impact of taking twenty-five dolphins from the wild in the Solomon Islands, on the survival of this species in Solomon Islands. The [International Union for Conservation of](#)

[Nature](#) (IUCN), a leading authority on the environment and sustainable development and the largest global environmental network, had advised against the export of dolphins from Solomon Islands and urged countries to not allow the importation of any dolphins from the Solomon Islands

We hope that the relevant authorities and organisations will reconsider their current decision to allow the trade in the dolphins and review whether the plans of keeping them in captivity should continue.

Overall, Singapore has done well in enacting legislation to protect animals. We have some of the strongest pieces of animal protection legislation in the region and it is something we are very proud of. We do, however, need stricter enforcement, and we also need to hand out more deterrent penalties instead of warning letters or composition fines.

What are your views on the level of awareness and contribution among Singaporeans on these issues?

I strongly believe that the level of awareness amongst Singaporeans on animal protection issues has increased significantly over the past decade. ACRES, along with several other animal welfare groups, have extensive outreach programmes and we have empowered Singaporeans with knowledge about these issues. The media have also played a vital role, publishing an increasing number of animal-related stories and programmes.

But it is not enough to simply empower people with knowledge. More importantly, we need to inspire them to take action and make a difference. I feel that this is lacking at this point and most Singaporeans, whilst aware of the issues, usually still do not see the need to take action.

I sometimes feel that this is not only a problem when it comes to animals, but a more systemic problem where we always feel that we do not need to worry, as someone else will address and solve the problem and we do not need to do it.

I do believe that the tide is turning, not as fast as I hope, but more and more people are starting to take action and play an active role. At ACRES, our amazing dedicated volunteers clocked up over 7,362 hours in 2010, helping ACRES help animals.

What can private, public and people sectors do to enhance conservation efforts?

The most important thing is to speak out and voice their concerns. A lot of issues can be addressed more efficiently if the government feels that the public is more supportive and want more changes.

We need to not only make changes in our lifestyles, but we need to become advocates for animals. We need to tell other people why we need to make a difference for animals and urge them to join the movement. Let us stop whispering our concerns, and let us start making our voices heard by speaking out.

What would you say is ACRES's single biggest contribution to Singapore?

I believe our single biggest contribution to Singapore is that we have shown that nothing is impossible, and that if you are passionate and dedicated enough you can make a difference in Singapore.

Most people feel that there is no such thing as advocacy and activism work in Singapore, but I feel that we have our own brand of advocacy and activism. Many people were very sceptical about our dreams and ambition when we first set up ACRES almost ten years ago, but we have, over the years, shown that our dreams and ambitions are possible and achievable.

For example, when we announced plans to open the first dedicated wildlife rescue centre in Singapore, someone told me that if I succeed, pigs will fly. For that reason, we now have a flying pig model at the reception of the ACRES Wildlife Rescue Centre which we opened last August! In the words of Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

What are the priorities of ACRES for 2011? Any alignment with international conservation movements?

We are continuing with our efforts in six focus areas: Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation, Tackling the Wildlife Trade, Zoo Animal Welfare, Humane Education, Community Outreach and Promoting Cruelty-Free Living.

We have rescued, treated and rehabilitated over 880 wild animals since the official opening of the ACRES Wildlife Rescue Centre in Singapore in August 2009. We run our wildlife rescue services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Our investigations have led to many wildlife criminals being brought to task. Our campaigns and engagements with the government have led to vast improvements to the welfare of animals and even improvements to national laws.

We believe education is the key to ending animal cruelty. We work closely with schools and community groups in order to ensure that today's children grow up with empathy, compassion and respect for all animals, as well as each other, and are inspired to change their world for the better. To date, we have conducted over 500 roadshows and talks, and we reach out to over 100,000 children and adults every year.

We currently have over 20,000 volunteers/supporters in our database. Our volunteer opportunities promote volunteerism in Singapore and create a more caring and compassionate society.

About the dolphins of RWS. Any plans to take this further, maybe turn it into a campaign or something?

We remain committed to campaigning for Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) to reconsider their decision to house wild-caught dolphins at their attraction. We have been in positive discussions with RWS and they have already scrapped their original plan to exhibit whale sharks, a plan which ACRES, along with several other animal welfare groups, opposed.

They have also decided to leave sharks fin off the restaurant menus for their entire resort. We are hopeful that they will extend their marine conservation efforts to dolphins as well and we will launch a more extensive campaign this year.

For more information about volunteering for ACRES, log on to: <http://www.acres.org.sg/volunteer/volunteer.html>. To make a donation, log on to: <http://www.acres.org.sg/support/donatenow.html>

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