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Taken from home into a life of pain

By Chai Mei Ling

Kuala Lumpur - A picture is worth a thousand words. One by an animal welfare group last month showed a lion in a local zoo caged within an enclosure only twice its length.

The group claimed some animals in zoos were kept in small cages and taken out only to perform tricks before a crowd.

Bears have their legs tied to bicycle pedals to force them to keep on cycling. Macaques are chained by the neck and yanked around for photography sessions. The legs of elephants are chained to the ground for more than 20 hours a day.

These cases were recorded by the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), a Singapore-based animal welfare group, with support from the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA).

In its survey last year into the well-being of animals at all 39 zoos in Peninsular Malaysia, it found that the majority of zoos did not have "acceptable welfare standards" for animals.

More than 660 enclosures, including large facilities housing thousands of animals and mini zoos with just a few animals, were assessed.

The survey found that some animals were denied species-specific needs, such as access to a bathing pool for semi-aquatic species and trees or similar structures to climb for arboreal species.

Most enclosures provided extremely small living spaces, which in some cases, severely restricted the animals' movement. They also had no private areas for animals to retreat to, which can be a major source of stress.

Three-quarters of the enclosures had wire mesh, concrete or compacted earth, which could cause discomfort, pain, infection and injury.

In 17 per cent of the enclosures, animals were observed exhibiting abnormal behaviour, such as elephants swaying from side to side and primates pacing up and down.

At several zoos, wounded animals were still on display.

Acres executive director Louis Ng said poor welfare conditions in zoos negatively impact animals and undercut the good work that many zoos were doing.

It also impacts children negatively.

"If they see animals housed in appalling conditions and are made to perform circus-style tricks, they will grow up with the impression that such practices are acceptable and that animal welfare is not an important issue."

Last month, Acres followed up with another survey, focusing on the 10 most unsatisfactory zoos -- two in Johor, two in Pahang, and one each in Malacca, Negri Sembilan, Perak, Kedah, Terengganu and Kelantan. A total of 159 enclosures were rated.

Welfare standards were found to be the same or worse.

In between these two surveys, the society held meetings with the Malaysian Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) Peninsular Malaysia and local non-governmental organisations.

During the 2nd Malaysia Zoo Animal Welfare roundtable discussions held here last week, six NGOs signed a memorandum of understanding to set up myZOO, the country's first coalition dedicated to zoo animal welfare issues.

The members -- Green Wings, Malaysian Animal Welfare Society, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) Johor, SPCA Penang and SPCA Selangor -- aim to encourage stakeholders to prioritise zoo animal welfare and strive towards achieving optimal standards.

MyZOO spokesperson Dr Kavita Kaur said over the next two months, it would seek to work with Perhilitan and establish relationships with the 10 zoos surveyed.

Kavita said the coalition "has nothing against zoos".

"We do understand that a lot of zoos were built as a business, but business has to be done ethically.

"The most basic improvements can be done without a lot of money."

MyZOO protem chairperson Ahmad Kamal Mohd Ali said zoos had to improve to remain relevant to changing times.

"Young Malaysians are increasingly vocal in social issues, including those related to wildlife conservation and animal well-being.

"Following recent news reports on cruelty to zoo animals, there was so much concern among the younger set of Malaysians, who voiced out their opinions on Twitter and Facebook.

"These Malaysians will definitely vote with their money and won't frequent zoos that mistreat animals."