

## Overseas Singaporean

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### Protecting Animals an Acre at a Time

*By Clement Wan*

Not everyone loves turtle soup, but those who do, savour the sweet herbal taste in which the meat and innards of the turtle are used in the brewing of this local delicacy. Louis Ng was one of the many people who would queue up for what some would see as a luxurious dish, but not anymore. When he was 14 years old, a documentary about turtles made him change his mind. "All of a sudden it just clicked that not only was I not of the solution; I was actually part of the problem because I loved to drink turtle soup. Since then, I took my first step to make a difference and that was simply to give up consuming turtle soup," says the animal lover.

Louis would go on to do more for animals than just abstaining from turtle broth when he founded the animal welfare group **ACRES** (Animal Concerns Research and Education Society) in 2001 and became its President and Executive Director. Though his parents aren't animal lovers, Louis' passion for protecting wildlife was already present as a child and the turning point which jolted him into action occurred when he watched the film 'Gorillas in the Mist', a biopic about Dian Fossey. "Halfway through the movie, I turned to my mom and said 'Mommy I want to be just like Dian Fossey when I grow up.'" It wasn't the best of pitches by Louis to his mother as Dian was eventually murdered by poachers.

He kept working on his dream however, and in 2002 completed his degree in Biology at NUS and attained his masters in Primate Conservation two years later. During that time, Louis also volunteered as a chimp keeper at the Singapore Zoo where he would bring visitors on educational tours round the primate kingdom and assist in photography sessions with the chimps. "What I realised was that behind the scenes and sometimes openly, the zookeepers were beating the chimps. There was one called Rumba who was a bit playful and whenever she misbehaved they would grab and hit her," he reveals. Louis voiced out his displeasure to zoo management and after leaving, informed the Straits Times. The published story led the zoo to re-think its methods and two years later, stopped the chimp photography programme and reunited Rumba with her mother at the enclosure.

"After that incident, I told The Straits Times that I will set up a group to tackle wildlife issues that Singaporeans are not very familiar with," says Louis and that promise has materialised in the formation of ACRES. Some of the objectives of this Singapore-based charity include tackling wildlife trade- where undercover operations are conducted to crackdown on illegal wildlife trade, and humane education- allowing the community to be empowered with knowledge in order to take action. "We have interns and volunteers that come down to help us at press conferences and road-shows and that's part of the active citizenry that we are talking about. Not just always complaining about the issue, but helping to find the solution in taking action," encouraged the recipient of the 2007 'Outstanding Young Persons of Singapore' Award.

Recently, the ex-commando and his ACRES team organised a **music campaign** to free wild-caught dolphins Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) imported for a new spa attraction. Twenty-seven dolphins from the Solomon Islands were due to be transported to Singapore, of these, two have died. The remaining 25 are currently in the Philippines, being trained for entertainment purposes while their Sentosa enclosures are being prepared. Explains Louis, “We hope that RWS will make a socially responsible decision and free the dolphins. Let us follow the example set by other progressive countries like Chile and Costa Rica who have banned the capture and display of dolphins.” Part of the campaign is also a ‘Save the World’s Saddest Dolphins’ road-show in which the first of the series was held at Far East Plaza.

“We’re not trying to close all captive fisheries down. The key point is to keep animals that can do well in captivity rather than those that are so wide ranging like the dolphins.” From saying ‘no’ to turtle soup to protecting chimps and campaigning for the release of wild dolphins, these are but a few of the many accomplishments Louis has achieved in a life that is simply driven by his love for animals. It is also evident that ACRES is going from strength to strength in spreading their message concerning animal rights, “we are expanding into Laos as we build another rescue centre there, and we’re opening up an office in Australia and also launching projects in Malaysia and Thailand.” Once told by the zoo, “you’re just a small boy and you’ll never win”, the undying passion of this ‘small boy’ and his ACRES team ensure that the future for animals in our region remains bright. Animal rights is alive and splashing in Singapore, thanks to impassioned citizens like Louis who stand up and give voice to a cause worth championing.