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RGS students pitch in to spread the message

A group of students from Raffles Girls' School (Secondary) will be among adult volunteers stationed in the nature reserves to discourage people from releasing animals.

This year, the eight girls have already held public exhibitions, conducted nature walks through MacRitchie Reservoir and visited primary schools to spread the message.

They are working with the National Parks Board (NParks) to put up signs and exhibits in nature areas to explain the fate of released animals, and have also recruited about 50 of their schoolmates to join in this month's volunteer campaign by NParks to discourage animal release.

The RGS project, called AnimaX Release, received a \$1,500 grant last September from the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) to grow in scope.

The project had its beginnings last year as a school research project, said team leader Deborah Tang, 16. But research, making posters and leading nature walks for the project took up more of the girls' time than expected, and it evolved into a two-hour-a-week extracurricular activity.

She said some girls in the group had previously released unwanted pets into the wild, not knowing then that it was illegal, could threaten the balance of nature and also harm the released animals.

RGS team member Stephanie Siow, 16, recalls releasing hamsters into forested areas and aquarium fish into drains as a child.

"I really thought the hamsters would be happy in the wild," she said, with remorse.

From a survey of 200 people at MacRitchie Reservoir, the girls found out that they were not alone in thinking this way: More than a third of people polled also believed it was all right to release animals into the wild.

AnimaX Release is one of four projects Acres is supporting. The others are for projects on insanitary dog farms called "puppy mills", a cat care and sterilisation programme and one that raises awareness of the continuing illegal trade of wildlife.

Acres' executive director Louis Ng said: 'This is not just a conservation issue, since most of the animals released are non-native species, but also one of animal welfare, because most of the animals released are unable to survive in the wild.'