Animal advocacy is alive and well in Singapore, with animal lovers forming welfare groups for their furry friends
By Mak Mun San and Karl Ho

SHE was a three-month-old mongrel, scampering around the Bishan area, frightened and alone. A man spotted her and took her home. But the stench from her open sores - due to a severe fungal infection - was so bad that he could only bear to put her up for a night. He appealed to the Action for Singapore Dogs (ASD) for help. Members of ASD took the puppy to a vet, who diagnosed her skin condition as genetic and requiring long-term care.

Although he advised that she be put down, ASD stuck to its no-kill policy. That was in June 2003. Today, Chops, an affectionate dog, is recovering steadily under the care of her fosterer. When she is fully fit, she will be put up for adoption.

The story of Chops is just one of many sad yet uplifting examples of animal rescue taking place here.

Yes, animal activism is alive - and the activists are making themselves heard.

In recent years, animal lovers have ganged up to form more than 12 non-profit welfare groups for dogs, cats, rabbits and wildlife.

With the help of the Internet, individuals not affiliated to any group have also been actively involved in fostering and re-homing stray animals.

Indeed, gone are the days when animal lovers passively left matters to the two main players in animal welfare - the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA) and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA).

And they are not championing their cause alone either. Some of these groups attract a large following, such as the 2 1/2-year-old Animal Lovers League (ALL), which has 700 members.

'Animal welfare may be one of the lowest priorities for the Government, but there are actually many, many animal lovers out there who do care a lot,' says ALL's founder Cathy Strong, a Chinese Singaporean businesswoman.

ASD's president and co-founder Ricky Yeo, 36, says people started these groups because they wanted
to 'make a difference'.

'They felt not enough is being done for the animals or that things can be done in a better way,' says the software programmer.

LifeStyle estimates that there are up to 5,000 people actively involved in the animal cause here, with up to 1,000 animals under their care currently. Many are professionals like lawyers, doctors and teachers, with more women than men.

When speaking to these animal lovers, it does not take long to realise that many are against the policies of the AVA, SPCA and the Housing Board (HDB).

They are angry about the HDB rule that allows only small breeds of dogs in flats, as well as its ban on cats.

The Ministry of National Development, HDB's parent ministry, has said that this rule is to 'preserve a pleasant living environment and good relationships among the residents in our high-rise, high-density public housing estates'.

But the rules mean that many are unable to adopt cats and mongrels - which are predominantly medium-sized - which in turn exacerbates the longstanding problem of strays.

There are an estimated 60,000 stray cats and 20,000 stray dogs roaming the streets currently.

Ms Wong Wai Ping, 37, who started the online group DogPeople.org in 2003, cites the animal killing policy of both the AVA and the SPCA as another reason behind increasing animal activism.

'People are getting fed up with killings, more killings and never-ending killings,' says the businesswoman, currently based in Japan.

Animals lovers were up in arms during the Sars epidemic in 2003 when AVA intensified its efforts to cull stray cats for public health reasons.

Around the same period, AVA also incurred the wrath of cat lovers when it suspended the Stray Cat Rehabilitation programme where volunteers collect stray cats for spaying before returning them to their environment.

According to AVA, the scheme did not resolve the problems of strays.

SOS Animals founder Sandy Lim, 50, feels that AVA's response to strays is too 'clinical'.

'Their approach is: 'You've got a stray, set traps for it, catch it and then kill it',' she says with a steely glint in her eyes. 'But for animal lovers like us, we react with our hearts and our minds.'

Her group advocates sterilisation, as does most other welfare groups.

Animal activists have also been calling on the authorities to control the number of pet shops and breeders here to arrest the alarming rise in the number of abandoned pets.

**They don't burn fur coats**

LAST year, a total of 4,050 dogs and 6,131 cats were impounded and culled by the AVA, while 2,119 dogs and 5,271 cats were put to sleep by the SPCA.

Dr Leow Su Hua, 41, head of AVA's animal welfare education branch, says that the agency does not wish to see any animal put down.

But it has no choice but to put down animals in its pound because they 'have no owners or are surrendered to us as their owners are unable to care for them any longer'.

Meanwhile, the SPCA, which is seen by its detractors as a 'killer' rather than protector, of animals, stands firm by its policy in spite of the criticism.

Executive officer Deirdre Moss says: 'The SPCA does not believe in keeping animals confined long-term in cages or kennels when there is no prospective home for them.'

Each month, it receives more than 1,000 stray or abandoned cats, dogs, rabbits and other small animals, of which only 85 or so are adopted.

'Unless you've been there and you've tried running a shelter with a no-kill policy and which takes in unlimited numbers of animals, I don't think you qualify to condemn or speak up against euthanasia,'
To be fair, animal activists here are not placard-waving zealots who burn fur coats, unlike some of their counterparts in the West like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta).

They are also able to put their differences aside and cooperate with the authorities to improve the welfare of animals.

For example, the three-year-old Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) has provided tip-offs to the AVA, leading to the seizure of wild animals kept illegally.

Others, like ALL, ASD, SOS Animals, Cat Welfare Society (CWS) and the House Rabbit Society, have worked with the AVA to promote responsible pet ownership.

Ms Christina Eng, 37, the vice-president of CWS, says: 'We may be passionate about our cause, but we're also very rational and sane people.'

In fact, SPCA's Ms Moss says she is happy to see the emergence of such private groups.

'To me, the more the better,' she says. 'You can't possibly have just one group doing animal welfare work. You need a variety of specialist groups to work together to create more awareness.'

What are your views on animal activism? Send them to stlife@sph.com.sg

Sars culling was the spark

ANIMAL LOVERS LEAGUE (ALL)

Mission: Advocates sterilisation and a haven where animals are not threatened.

In the beginning: Businesswoman Cathy Strong, who is in her early 50s, has been doing animal welfare work since the 1980s. In 2002, she decided to form ALL, a registered society, to educate pet owners about the importance of sterilisation.

When the Sars crisis broke in 2003 and the authorities began culling stray cats, she felt an 'urgent need' to set up a rescue facility. Pets Villa, ALL's shelter in Pasir Ris, opened in February last year.

'When I think of all these animals which we've saved and the happiness and gratitude of their owners, I know my decision was right,' says Mrs Strong, who is widowed and has no children.

She lives with 10 dogs in a single-storey house in Sembawang.

Flock: The society is overseeing 300 cats and about 140 dogs. Mrs Strong also sets aside a few days a week to feed stray dogs in areas like Changi.

Kennel: Pets Villa is about half the size of a football field and has boarding facilities for 800 cats and 150 dogs.

Although most of its residents are rescued strays which are now pets of the persons sponsoring their stay, many are also available for adoption. It provides boarding services at $130 a dog a month and between $35 and $50 a cat.

Manpower/cost: The society has about 700 members while about 50 volunteers keep the shelter running. Two full-time staff join them next month. It requires $22,000 a month in expenses and depends solely on donations.

Soundbite: 'If these animals could speak, you'd be hearing their silent cries. They'd be saying: 'We were not born children but puppies and kittens. Can you still love us?',' says Mrs Strong.

Poster pet: Lady Cyber, a stray rescued from Science Park last November. She was pregnant then and gave birth to eight puppies at Pets Villa. All have been adopted or sponsored except her. 'She's very sweet and gets along well with cats. Please give her a good home,' says Mrs Strong.

Contact: E-mail info@animalloversleague.com or visit www.animalloversleague.com

Moving into Action

ACTION FOR SINGAPORE DOGS (ASD)
**Mission:** Rescue, foster and re-home stray and abandoned dogs.

**In the beginning:** Software programmer Ricky Yeo, 36, was a volunteer at animal shelter Noah's Ark before it relocated from Seletar to Johor in 2000 because its lease expired. To fill the void it left behind, Mr Yeo formed ASD, a registered society, with two friends in December that year.

'We held our first adoption drive at the backyard of somebody's house, and that's how it all started,' says the married dog lover, who has a cross-breed called Winter.

In the last four years, ASD has provided medical aid to more than 500 dogs and re-homed about 300.

'It is a mentally and physically draining job, but it's the people who are draining my energy, not the dogs,' says Mr Yeo, who spends 'whatever available time I have after work' on this cause.

**Flock:** ASD is overseeing about 70 dogs which are now in foster homes awaiting adoption.

**Kennel:** It has none, but operates through a network of about 70 foster homes.

**Manpower/cost:** The society has 10 active volunteers among a membership base of 400 and mailing list of 2,000. It needs $5,000 a month in expenses. The money comes from donations and sale of merchandise like T-shirts and calendars.

**Soundbite:** 'There are 20,000 stray dogs out there but we'll not be overwhelmed by the numbers. We'll just focus on one dog at a time,' says Mr Yeo.

**Poster pet:** Winter, five, a gentle and sweet-natured cross-breed Mr Yeo adopted from Noah's Ark before it relocated to Johor Bahru.

'He was a stray about to be rounded up by the authorities, but was saved at the last minute by an old woman who put him at Noah's Ark. He is now the ASD ambassador and our pet therapy dog.'

**Contact:** Page 9259-0698, e-mail info@asdsingapore.com or visit www.asdsingapore.com

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**Mission:** To help dogs - be they strays, abused dogs or pets given up for adoption - find new homes.

**In the beginning:** Five years ago, housewife Lydia Chong decided to intervene when she found out that a neighbour wanted to give up his dog to the SPCA. She took it in and eventually gave it to a fellow dog lover.

Now, Ms Chong, who is in her 30s and has a six-year-old son, runs a one-man dog welfare service from her home in Bukit Batok. Apart from maintaining a website, she rescues dogs from the streets and helps them find new owners.

**Flock:** Ms Chong says she has helped 150 dogs get adopted. Around 20 dogs in foster care are available for adoption.

**Kennel:** None.

**Manpower/cost:** About $200 a month for maintaining the website and other expenses. Foster homes and other sponsors pay for the dogs' living expenses.

**Soundbite:** 'In my line of work, I just can't hold decent conversations with irresponsible people. A German shepherd owner once told me, 'If you're not here by 8am tomorrow to pick up my dog, I'm going to send it to the SPCA to be put down.' I was furious and snapped back: 'Is this how you pay your dog for its years of companionship?'

**Poster pet:** Blessings, a five-year-old mongrel. When Ms Chong found her, she was literally kept on a short leash. 'Nobody wanted her, and my compassion for her grew, so I brought her home,' she
Contact: Call 6665-0600, e-mail k9love@singnet.com.sg or visit www.k9love.org.

Dog retirement home

NOAH’S ARK NATURAL ANIMAL SANCTUARY (NANAS)

Mission: To provide an old folks’ home for strays and ageing animals. But the farm accepts animals on a case-by-case basis only. People who give up their animals will also have to pay for their upkeep.

Currently based in the town of Pekan Nanas in Johor, Nanas members go to neighbouring kampungs to promote animal sterilisation. It also organises tours of the farm for Singaporeans.

In the beginning: In 1995, retired flight steward and animal lover Raymund Wee opened an animal haven in Seletar West Farmway 5 called Noah's Ark Lodge. He also ran a pet grooming service then to supplement the haven's income.

But he lost the tender for the land in April 2000 and was given three extensions after which he had to vacate it. A Singaporean businessman who had a 4ha piece of land at Pekan Nanas offered it to him. Mr Wee, 54, moved his ark there in late 2000. He currently pays a nominal rent of $500 to use the land.

Flock: The shelter houses 356 dogs, 200 cats, 20 rabbits, 12 goats, six horses and a variety of geese, ducks, squirrels and fishes.

Kennel: The farm at Pekan Nanas is about the size of five football fields.

Manpower/cost: Mr Wee says he has put in more than $100,000 to build the farm and spends up to $15,000 a month to run it. It has four full-time workers and three caregivers, including Mr Wee. Apart from receiving maintenance and sponsorship fees for the animals, Mr Wee sells merchandise like calendars and T-shirts to make ends meet. Volunteers also chip in with money.

Soundbite: ‘Do you realise that there's been no news of dog casualties in the recent tsunami tragedy? That's because they sensed something was wrong and ran away. Read the signals sent by them carefully, because they're never wrong,’ he says.

Poster pet: Mr Wee says he loves all his animals. ‘When you have so many animals, you can't give them special treatment.’

Contact: Call 9757-2528, e-mail lynda_at_nanas@yahoo.com.sg or visit www.noahsarklodge.com

Acts of loving kindness

METTA CATTERY

Mission: Primarily a halfway house for injured and abused strays or those recuperating from sterilisation operations. Metta means loving kindness in the Pali language.

In the beginning: Unimpressed by how the SPCA deals with stray animals, Ms Lee Siew Ying, 52, decided to open her own animal sanctuary five years ago.

’I found a cat and three kittens that were less than a week old and the SPCA said they had to be put down because it didn't have space for them,’ says the clinic billings administrator, who is married and lives in Queenstown.

Flock: Metta is looking after 120 cats and 13 dogs. Two of them are the shih tzus which were found infested with maggots at a breeder's farm in Pasir Ris in December. The matter was reported in the media. Ms Lee says the dogs are recovering.
BUNDLE OF JOY: Rabbits are not for eating, says House Rabbit Society's Teeny Teh, who adopted Cashew. -- TERENCE TAN

Cattery: A 60 sq m animal farm in Pasir Ris.

Manpower/cost: It has 15 regular volunteers. Ms Lee's 22-year-old son helps to ferry the cats to the vet.

The farm requires about $3,800 a month to run, excluding medical bills. As the cattery is not a registered society, it can only receive donations in kind.

Soundbite: 'If I have $10, $8 will go to my cats and $2 will go to my lunch. If there's a will, there's always a way. I'll tell the vet to do what he can for the animal, and if need be, I'll go online to ask for help with the bill,' says Ms Lee.

Poster pet: T3, a 10-month-old cat brought to the cattery last year. Doctors had to amputate one of his injured legs.

Contact: E-mail mettacats@yahoo.com.sg or visit www.mettacats.org

Hopping right to it

HOUSE RABBIT SOCIETY (SINGAPORE)

Mission: It aims to reduce the number of unwanted rabbits - estimated at more than 100 a month - by rescuing and re-homing them. It also holds talks on rabbit welfare in schools.

In the beginning: The society started in 2002 as a Yahoo online group for Singaporeans who love rabbits. It registered itself as a society that year. It is affiliated to the House Rabbit Society in the United States, the flagship body that promotes rabbit welfare around the world. The society here currently has about 250 members.

'My five bunnies leave a trail of destruction in the house but I don't care because they're just so sweet,' says HRSS member Christine Teo, 24.

Flock: Currently, 25 rabbits are awaiting adoption. They are in the care of foster homes. The society foots the bills for their care.

Kennel: None.

Manpower/cost: Ten committee members work from home, maintaining the website and coordinating talks and adoption efforts. Operational costs are about $700 a month, excluding medical expenses for sick rabbits. Costs are met primarily by donations and sale of merchandise like car decals.

Soundbite: 'I've seen rabbits being eaten on reality shows on television. I've heard of rabbits being shot or electrocuted by Australian farmers. You can't change the world.

'But we just want to show Singaporeans that rabbits are affectionate and intelligent companions, not pests or food,' says president Teeny Teh, 24, a marketing executive for an IT company.

Poster pet: Cashew, a three-year-old rabbit. It was abandoned at an old folks' home last year and adopted by Ms Teh.

Contact: E-mail info@hrss.net or visit www.hrss.net

Animal 'ministry'

SOS ANIMALS

Mission: This support group takes in stray cats and dogs. It advocates sterilisation rather than culling and helps to re-home strays.

In the beginning: In 1999, Ms Sandy Lim, a creative consultant in the educational services industry, saw a kitten straying dangerously close to a neighbour's dog and took it home. She started caring for and adopting more stray cats, mostly those injured or near death, before setting up SOS.
BATTY ABOUT CATTY: SOS Animals' Sandy Lim's favourite is Catty, rescued six years ago. -- LAU FOOK KONG

COOKIE AND CREAM: Ms Christina Eng took in Cookie when her owners returned to China. -- LIM WUI LIANG

'I see this as a ministry, not a mainstream one, but a ministry nonetheless,' says Ms Lim, 50. She is single and lives in the East Coast area.

She maintains that she has spent up to $500,000 sterilising strays over the last five years. She also feeds stray cats and dogs in the East Coast area daily.

**Flock:** She is looking after 80 stray cats and two dogs. She also tends to 20 stray dogs in Jurong Island.

**Cattery:** The SOS Animals Rescue Centre is located in a rented semi-detached house in the Changi area.

**Manpower/cost:** Five volunteers, including Ms Lim. The shelter requires $6,000 a month in expenses, including rent. Ms Lim says she uses her own money and is trying to sell some paintings she has to raise more.

**Soundbite:** 'People don't gravitate towards you when you do animal rescue because you're talking about how puppies drown and how kittens have their legs gnawed off by maggots because of human abuse.

'But you don't feel lonesome because you not only have animals for friendship, you've reached this spiritual realm of giving,' she says.

**Poster pet:** Catty, six, the first kitten she rescued. 'She's the one which started it all for me.'

**Contact:** Call 9455-1588, e-mail sandy@sosanimals.com or visit www.sosanimals.com

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Not an easy job

**CAT WELFARE SOCIETY (CWS)**

**Mission:** This registered charity advocates saving the lives of stray cats through sterilisation instead of culling them.

It does not have a rescue service but works with vets to provide subsidised medical treatment to stray cats that have been rescued by the public.

**In the beginning:** In 1999, outraged by a newspaper report about five kittens being burnt alive in a box, a few friends got together to help other harmless stray cats.

Vice-president Christina Eng, 37, admits that animal welfare is not an easy job.

The full-time volunteer, who is married, says: 'There'll always be people out there who just do not like cats and will make groundless complaints just to spite their neighbours. But at the end of the day, someone still has to be there for the cats.'

**Flock:** It is now looking after 200 cats. In 2003, the CWS sterilised 1,250 cats and found homes for 235.

**Cattery:** It has none. Fosterers help to take care of rescued cats till they find permanent homes.

**Manpower/cost:** It has about 300 members, 200 volunteers and one full-time staff. It needs about $11,500 a month in expenses, the bulk of which goes to sterilisation, medical and fostering costs. The money comes mainly from donations.

**Soundbite:** 'Our wish is for every cat to have a safe place to live without suffering or fear,' says Ms Eng.

**Poster pets:** Cookie, a 1 1/2-year-old ginger-coloured cat given up for adoption by her owners who were returning to China.

The tortoise-shell female is Maya, a stray which was found in a covered drain, scrawny and hurt. Semi-paralysed in the back, she is now settled in a loving home.

**Contact:** Call its sterilisation mailbox on 7000-2287647, e-mail info@catwelfare.org or visit
**Spreading a little Joy**

**EDNAJOY NGO**

**Mission:** Not affiliated to any organisation, this dog lover organises adoption drives and re-homes dogs.

**In the beginning:** Miss Ngo, 30, a health worker, adopted her first mongrel in 2002 and discovered the happiness of giving a new lease of life to a needy stray.

Last April, she organised a small-scale adoption drive together with the Mongrel Appreciation Club. She has since held another three such events, with another one coming up next Sunday.

'Finding homes for dogs is a great satisfaction. From homeless strays, they become pets with homes,' says Miss Ngo, who has re-homed seven dogs so far.

'Joy alone is not complete. I want to share the joy of seeing the owner with the new dog, seeing how both of them adapt and then begin to give unconditional love to each other.'

**Flock:** No more than five at any one time.

**Kennel:** None. All the dogs are in foster homes.

**Manpower/cost:** She is basically an independent operator but fellow dog lovers chip in to help her during adoption drives.

**Soundbite:** 'The breed of the dog does not determine its fate. Your love does.'

**Poster pet:** Huey, a stray she helped to foster in December 2003. She tried to re-home him but eventually fell under his charm and adopted him herself.

'From a dog who hated to be touched and had no trust in people, he has become one of the sweetest darlings on earth,' she says. 'I don't know his breed, but it doesn't matter. He is purely loved for being who he is.'

**Contact:** E-mail singaonco@yahoo.com.sg

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**No dumping please**

**ANIMAL PARADISE**

**Mission:** To provide happy shelters for animals and to raise awareness about sterilisation.

**In the beginning:** MediaCorp actor Xie Shaoguang and some friends from the Amitufo Buddhist Centre in Johor Baru started work on the Animal Paradise shelter in September 2002. It opened its doors in July 2003.

Xie, 43, says he feels fulfilled when he is helping the animals, but his spirits are sometimes 'dampened' by unreasonable members of the public.

'They think that because we run a charity organisation, it's 'you should, you should, you should';' he says.

'If you give me stupid reasons like you're giving up your dog because it's affecting your marriage, how can you expect me to just accept that and take the dog in?'

**Flock:** It has 200 dogs, 200 cats, three cows, three monkeys, two horses, two pigs and one wild boar, as well as peacocks, deer, goats, rabbits, turkeys, ostriches, tortoises, fishes and lizards. 'It's like a zoo,' quips Xie.

**Kennel:** The shelter sits on a piece of land in Johor about the size of six football fields.

**Manpower/cost:** Run by a caretaker, some farm workers and a group of volunteers. Between
RM20,000 (S$8,700) and RM30,000 a month in expenses. It survives on donations.

**Soundbite:** ‘We respect all lives, so it's a no-kill policy for us. Just imagine this: If an orphan or ill person is taken to a home, do you kill to make way for another person?’ says Xie.

**Contact:** Xie does not want to provide any contact information as irresponsible pet owners have been dumping their animals at the shelter ever since it was reported in the media.