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Monastery, nature lovers spread green message on Vesak Day

By Bridgette See, Channel NewsAsia

SINGAPORE : Thousands of Buddhists in Singapore celebrated Vesak Day on Wednesday, starting the morning at one or another of the island's temples. But at least one monastery is celebrating the birth of Buddha with a twist.

And around the island nature lovers spent the day trying to discourage devotees from carrying on a long-standing tradition of releasing captive animals into the wild.

Buddhists traditionally celebrate Vesak Day with prayers and offerings.

But this year at the Kong Meng San Phor Khak See Monastery, one of the biggest temples in Singapore, devotees were also given a few tips on caring for the environment -- from learning to minimise waste to separating their trash into paper, plastics and cans.

"Vesak is a season for gratitude, so every year, we highlight different aspect of areas in which we should be thankful for. This year, we decided on using the environment, taking care of the environment as the main theme for our celebration," said Pua Yeow Khoon, executive director of Kong Meng San Phor Khah See Monastery.

Caring for the environment includes urging devotees not to release animals that could harm the natural habitat.

The act of releasing captive animals into the wild has been a long tradition for Buddhists who do it as an act of compassion.

But over the years, profiteers have turned this into a money-making venture by capturing or breeding animals to sell to devotees. This is exactly what nature lovers are against.

Although it is illegal to release animals into Singapore's parks and rivers, many still do so.

"I have been to parks and reservoirs and have seen a lot of dead turtles. All these dead turtles released by people are non-native and couldn't survive in this natural habitat," said nature lover Ashley Ng.

So Ms Ng, who is also a Buddhist, roped in 50 volunteers to help stake out various parks, hoping to stop devotees from releasing animals on Vesak Day.

And they had some success.

Volunteers at one of Singapore's reservoirs stopped two families from releasing catfish and grass birds into the wetlands.

"They had a couple of fairly hefty-sized plastic bags, When it appeared those bags were moving, we figured maybe there's some living stuff in there. They said they were going to release fish," said Dr Shawn Lum, vice-president of the Nature Society.

"The idea wasn't so much to say, 'don't do this,' but rather to try to explain to them, maybe there's a way to help animals and show compassion in alternative ways."

This is the first time volunteers have worked with the National Parks Board to educate the public against releasing animals. - CNA



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