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VESAK DAY CELEBRATIONS

Volunteers tried to stop freeing of creatures

They staked out parks and reservoirs to advise 'compassionate' devotees not to free animals, as they could pose threat to wildlife

By Lynn Lee

OLD practices die hard. Buddhist devotees released insects, fish and other creatures into the wild to celebrate Vesak Day yesterday.

A group of about 30 volunteers, mostly from The Nature Society and National Parks Board (NParks), tried to stop them as the gesture is likely to kill the animals.

They stationed themselves at Mandai Lake, Upper Peirce Reservoir and Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and other areas. Then, when they spotted people carrying pails and plastic bags of frogs and fish, they gave them a pamphlet explaining why they should not release the creatures.

They managed to stop three at Upper Seletar Reservoir.

One was a man in his 40s with four bags of red and black fish and a bag of small frogs, who made it clear he would find somewhere else to release them.

'This is based on the Buddhist practice of showing compassion,' he told The Straits Times. 'I'm not doing anything wrong, so why should I stop?'

Releasing creatures is against the law.

Anyone found doing so in the reserves and parks can be fined up to \$10,000.

One reason, said NParks officer Genevieve Chua, is that many species released these days, like the American bullfrog, are not normally found here and could pose a danger to local wildlife.

Meanwhile, animals bought at pet stores and wet markets might have diseases which they could pass to other creatures.

Still, the Singapore Buddhist Lodge let around 800 birds, several hundred crickets and 1,000 fish go free. The man in charge of this at the Kim Yam Road temple, Mr Chua Thiam Siew, 53, said devotees had been told to let the temple take care of animal liberation.

The temple picked a 'suitable place' to let the animals go, he said. The crickets, for example, were released in a forested area near Mount Faber.

At the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery in Bright Hill Road, where The Nature Society had an exhibition on the negative consequences of such acts, critically-ill devotees were not discouraged from freeing creatures - they believe it will help relieve their suffering - but the temple



Stopped at Upper Seletar Reservoir, this determined devotee said he would release his bags of fish and frogs somewhere else instead. -- KEVIN YEO



Devotees bathe the Prince Siddhartha at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery. -- SEAN TAN

Party for needy

SOME of the most needy in Singapore got to feast yesterday on a variety of vegetarian delights to celebrate Vesak Day.

They were among more than 1,000 people, including senior citizens on public assistance schemes and disabled students, who attended the Vesak Great Joy Party at the Orchid Country Club. The annual celebration, organised by the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services, marks the birth, enlightenment and final nirvana of Buddha.

Said the president of the Buddhist Welfare Services, the Venerable Kuan Yan: 'We needn't ask ourselves how much we can contribute to the welfare of others. What matters is how sincere our contributions and commitments are.'

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itself stopped the practice several years ago.

Said its spokesman, Mr Pua Yeow Khoon:
'We encourage our devotees to perform humane acts like helping out with animal welfare, or buying fish at a kelong and returning them to the sea.'

Old folks' home resident Maria Pereira, 66, said of the party:
'It's always good for our mind and soul to go for outings.'

'After all, the best way to free an animal is to liberate it from our plates by going vegetarian.'

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