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Devotees flout law to free animals

Volunteers at parks try to dissuade Buddhists from their Vesak Day duty

By **Ho Lian-Yi**

ATTEMPTS by a group of 50 volunteers over the weekend to dissuade Buddhist devotees from releasing animals into the wild to mark Vesak Day tomorrow proved one thing: Old traditions die hard.

The team, which had placed themselves in areas such as nature reserves, the reservoir areas and Mandai Lake, found that devotees just had to make that symbolic release which they regard as a humane act during this Vesak season.

It was learnt that many among the more than 300 Buddhist temples here still have animal release as part of the celebrations, despite appeals from the National Parks Board (NParks) for them not to do so.

A temple said it was part of the Buddhist religion.

Mr Wong Tuan Wah, director of conservation at NParks, said in a letter to Streets published on May 27 that captive-bred animals "will not survive well as they do not have the natural instinct and capability to forage for food or even fend for themselves".

Such releases are also against the law. Under the National Parks Act, anyone found releasing any animal in the reserves or parks can be fined up to \$10,000.

But there was a noticeable change in the type of animals people were releasing. Most freed smaller animals and creatures such as tadpoles, crickets and fish – not rabbits, turtles, birds and so on.

Take the experience of Mr Ashley Ng, 34, a company manager who recruited about 50 volunteers and stationed them in nature parks and near reservoirs on Sunday.

They were there to supplement the work of NParks rangers.

Mr Ng, who was himself at Mandai Lake that day, said: "I saw an elderly couple with four bags of tadpoles, frogs and crickets. I tried to dissuade them. They went to another side and managed to release the tadpoles before I could stop them. I took away the crickets and frogs."

Another volunteer, medical technician Goh Si Guim, 41, described how he managed to dissuade a couple from releasing their fish and prawns.

"Some fishes and frogs are American, the tilapia is African. When you release them here, you are not very kind to our native animals," he said.

A Nature Society pamphlet said that buying animals to release may encourage people to trap them for sale.

Mr Chua Thiam Siew, 53, the director for the Liberating of Living Creatures Section at Singapore Buddhist Lodge, said that "animal liberation" was meant to prevent creatures from being killed unnecessarily.

He said that they no longer order large numbers of animals before Vesak Day for release.

Instead, they go to the markets on the day itself and buy animals about to go under the knife, such as crabs. They now shun turtles and pigeons.

Usually 1,000 to 2,000 devotees of the Kim Yam Road temple take part in "animal liberation" every year,



he said.

He called on devotees to leave “animal liberation” to the temple instead of doing it themselves.

He added: “We are hoping the Government can tell us clearly what creatures can be released, and where, because this practice is part of our religion.”



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