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Giving up an age-old tradition

Many Buddhists have stopped the practice of symbolically releasing animals

By [Ho Lian-Yi](#)

MANY Buddhists in Singapore are beginning to accept that they should dispense with their age-old practice of symbolically releasing animals into the wild on Vesak Day.

The well-known Bright Hill Buddhist temple, for example, no longer conducts "animal liberation" rites.

But Mr Shen Shian, 29, the chief editor of the temple's Web department, added that although it had stopped this yearly routine, it was not against it, as it is an ancient Buddhist practice.

"We as Buddhists should try not to encourage the sellers by buying animals during the Vesak season, but by doing it in a more random way," he said.

While it is considered more meritorious to release animals on a special occasion such as Vesak Day, he added: "If you are greedy for merit, you actually reduce your merit."

While there are still some who continue to release animals, an act which is against the law here, almost everyone Streets spoke to at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery during the Vesak Day celebrations yesterday said that they do not follow the practice.

At the Bright Hill temple, a "We are Family" exhibition and fair was held on the premises. The environment was a major theme. Ten recycling points were also introduced for the first time.

One of the exhibitors, the Nature Society (Singapore), held a picture display about the diversity of Singapore's wildlife and the adverse effects on the ecosystem of releasing animals into the wild.

One of the Buddhists there, Mr Lim, 58, a retired businessman, told Streets: "Before you release, you should look at our environment.

If you release a bird here, it will die. If I throw you on the moon, am I releasing life?"

Mr Andrew Tay, 40, the Nature Society's education officer, who was in charge of its display, said: "(When they see the pictures) most of the time they express surprise, like one visitor who said: 'We have this bird here, ah? How come I have never seen it?'"

Bright Hill's Mr Shen, who was in charge of the entire exhibition, said they had some 40,000 visitors this year, up from about 30,000 in 2002. There were no celebrations last year because of Sars.

Mr Ashley Ng, 34, a manager who stationed some 50 volunteers around the various conservation areas in Singapore to try to dissuade people from releasing animals, encountered fewer people bringing animals with them than he expected.

"Maybe more people are aware because of reports recently," he said, referring in part to the Streets report on Tuesday.

He said he saw a 20 per cent drop compared to Sunday, when his team saw about 10 cases.

"I managed to persuade a man not to release his luohan fish, so he donated them to me. Now I have to take care of them," he said with a laugh.

However, he said a possible reason for the drop was that people were now aware of where the volunteers were stationed, and may be deliberately avoiding those areas.