

## LCQ3: Animal release activities

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (May 31):

Question:

There are views that the situation of some members of the public releasing animals casually, including releasing animals into unsuitable habitats, as well as releasing aggressive, alien or cross-bred species, has not improved over the years, raising doubts that the existing legislation cannot achieve any deterrent effect. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has publicised through posters the impacts that may be brought about by animal release, and appealed to members of the public to consider taking other virtuous actions in lieu of animal release, such as tree-planting, making donations and participating in voluntary services, whether the Government has assessed the effectiveness of the relevant publicity and education work, including the number of relevant reports received, the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and convicted, as well as the trend of such figures, in each of the past three years;

(2) given that while the last-term Government proposed introducing offences in relation to "release or abandonment of animals leading to unnecessary suffering" under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance, there are views that such proposal neither targets at the problem of casual animal release nor the impacts of the relevant activities on the ecology, whether the Government will amend the Ordinance by following the practice of "scientific animal release" as advocated by the country and drawing reference from the country's Provisions on the Propagation and Release of Aquatic Organisms; and

(3) whether it will consider regulating animal release activities and promoting scientific animal release, such as requiring members of the public to conduct animal release activities through organisations which are permitted to undertake or host scientific animal release or restocking activities?

Reply:

President,

Improper release of animals, including placing animals in an unsuitable habitat, such as releasing freshwater species into the sea, might cause unnecessary suffering to those animals or even deaths. If the released species is an alien species or is incompatible with the local ecology, or may compete for resources with the native species, the local ecology may be

adversely affected. According to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Chapter 169), any person who improperly releases an animal and causes unnecessary suffering to the animal, will be liable on conviction to a maximum fine of \$200,000 and imprisonment for three years.

On the questions raised by Hon Steven Ho, we would like to reply as follows:

(1) Due to religious beliefs and cultural tradition, animal release activities have been common in Hong Kong for many years. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has all along been collaborating with organisations which are concerned about animal release activities, including the Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Hong Kong Society of Herpetology Foundation, to enhance public education, reminding the public to carefully consider how to arrange, choose and operate before participating in animal release activities, to avoid causing unnecessary suffering to animals or affecting the ecology and environment. In addition to placing relevant posters advocating against animal release on public transport, the AFCD displays promotional banners at release hotspots such as streams, temples, parks under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and public ferry piers etc. The AFCD will also inspect these hotspots and conduct publicity during certain festivals when release activities are more prevalent, to ensure animal release activities do not cause unnecessary suffering to animals.

Furthermore, the AFCD proactively liaises with major religious groups to discuss possible impact of animal release on animal welfare and local environment and ecology, and jointly recommend the public to consider other virtuous actions and living habits in lieu of animal release, such as environmental protection, tree planting, forest protection, vegetarianism and conservation etc. Appeals are also made to worshippers to avoid improper animal releases, since not only would they harm animal welfare and affect the local ecology, such activities would also deviate from the original intentions of religious animal release.

According to the AFCD's observations, the aforementioned publicity and education work has been successful to a certain extent. Animal release practices by the public have changed in recent years and such activities are not as prevalent as before. Past common practices of releasing freshwater animals into the sea are no longer common. Animal release activities are now usually conducted during certain religious festivals at some hotspots, such as piers, streams and ponds etc. The released species are common seafood and turtles etc. These activities generally do not amount to animal welfare problems. The AFCD staff conducted inspection and public education at animal release hotspots during the recent Buddha's Birthday, and no cases related to animal cruelty were found. From the perspective of conservation, since species currently released are generally some common seafood and turtles etc, there is no sign of significant adverse impact caused by animal release activities on the local ecology.

From 2020 to 2022, the number of complaints received by the AFCD were two, 11 and one respectively. Nobody was arrested for releasing animals and thus committing the animal cruelty offence.

(2) and (3) Although our publicity and education work has attained certain results in reducing improper animal releases, the Government believes there is still room for further improvement. In addition to continuously enhancing public education, we plan to further reduce improper animal releases through two approaches. In terms of animal welfare, we plan to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (the Ordinance), to specify that the release or abandonment of an animal which causes it to suffer, such as releasing freshwater fish or turtles into the sea which is an unsuitable habitat, is an act of cruelty to animals and an offence. We also plan to propose raising the penalties regarding cruelty acts to animals in order to increase deterrent effect. We are now pressing ahead with the preparation work for amending the Ordinance and expect that the proposed legislative amendments can be submitted to the Legislative Council for deliberation around the end of this year or early next year.

On the other hand, we plan to further reduce traditional animal releases through promoting scientific restocking on trial basis. Restocking refers to the releasing of aquatic species in the sea and rivers, including adult fish and fish fry or even other species. This type of scientific restocking exercise can enhance fisheries resources and improve the marine and riverine environment.

The AFCD already makes reference to the "Provisions on the Propagation and Release of Aquatic Organisms" formulated by the nation, when conducting restocking in suitable Hong Kong waters. In order to further reduce traditional animal releases, the AFCD will invite relevant religious groups and fishermen organisations to jointly explore the feasibility of engaging the public in restocking exercises organised and implemented by the Government, as well as guiding the public to participate in scientific restocking or other virtuous actions to replace traditional animal releases through education and publicities. The AFCD will identify suitable locations, including protected waters such as marine parks etc. to conduct a trial programme and invite relevant fishermen organisations, religious groups, other organisations which are concerned about animal release activities and the general public to try participating in restocking exercises. Specifically speaking, through suitable arrangements, we hope that the public can release animals that enhance fisheries resources and improve the marine and riverine environment at specified suitable locations, so as to achieve multiple wins. The AFCD will communicate with relevant organisations and make arrangements for the proposed trial programme.

Thank you, President.