

LCQ7: Animal release activities

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (June 23):

Question:

It is learnt that quite a number of members of the public have released animals casually without knowing the habitats necessary for their survival, which contrarily shorten the lives of the animals concerned. Furthermore, releasing animals at unsuitable locations or releasing animals which are not suitable for release may damage the ecological environment, and even trigger public health crisis. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the legislation currently in place to regulate animal release activities; the number of relevant reported cases received by the Government, and the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and convicted, in each of the past three years;

(2) of the details of the publicity and education work conducted in each of the past three years on preventing the improper release of animals;

(3) as the Government plans to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Cap. 169) to specify that abandonment of an animal which causes it to suffer unnecessarily (e.g. some acts of releasing animals into unsuitable environment) is an act of cruelty to animals, of the relevant details; and

(4) whether it will commence a study with animal welfare concern groups on the subject of animal release, e.g. identification of animal species that are suitable for release as well as suitable locations and seasons for the release, as well as collaborate with agricultural and fisheries bodies to provide scientific animal release services for those who practice animal release, including conducting animal release activities under suitable conditions and following up the condition of the animals after release (e.g. whether they are able to adapt to the new environment and whether they have caused negative impacts on the ecological environment)?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Environment Bureau, my reply to the question is as follows:

Animal release activities are not prohibited under the current legislation. However, improper release of animals, including placing animals in an unsuitable habitat, might affect their survival as well as the local

ecology. Whether an animal should be released and is suitable for release, and whether the release location or environment is appropriate, require examination and science-based assessment by relevant experts, based on factors such as the species/individual's health condition, its adaptability for being released to the wild, the conservation needs of the species, as well as the impact on the local natural environment, etc. If the released species is an alien species or is incompatible with the local ecology, it could compete for resources with the native species and adversely affect the local ecology. Therefore, the Government does not encourage the public to take part in animal release activities on their own.

The Government believes it is important to strengthen public education so as to raise the public's attention to animal release, and advise them to think carefully before participating in any such activities, to avoid effects on the natural environment. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and three organisations concerned about animal release activities, namely the Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Hong Kong Society of Herpetology Foundation, have jointly designed a poster on live animal release activities for public education on the potential impact of animal release activities. The posters are distributed and displayed at various locations in the community (including markets, bird gardens, ferry piers, country parks and geoparks), and have been sent to over 50 religious organisations. The public is reminded to think carefully before participating in animal release activities. AFCD also appeals to the public to consider taking other virtuous actions in lieu of animal release, such as tree-planting, making donation to wild animal rescue organisations or environmental organisations, assisting in the rescue of local animals and protection of their habitats, and participating in relevant voluntary services, etc. AFCD will continue to partner with organisations concerned about animal release activities in the promotion work on this front.

Under the current Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Cap. 169) (the Ordinance), any act that involves animal cruelty, causing any unnecessary suffering to an animal will contravene the Ordinance. An offender shall be liable on conviction to a fine of up to \$200,000 and imprisonment for three years. From 2018 to 2020, AFCD received seven, one and two complaints about animal release activities respectively. AFCD officers did not find any cruelty to animals during on-site inspections and hence no prosecution was instigated. In order to enhance animal welfare in Hong Kong, the Government proposes to amend the Ordinance, including introducing a positive duty of care on persons responsible for animals and increasing the penalties for acts of animal cruelty, etc. To make the Ordinance clearer, we also plan to specify that the release of an animal into an unsuitable environment, which causes it to suffer, is an act of cruelty to animals. We are now pressing ahead with the drafting of the legislation, and will strive to submit it to the Legislative Council in the next term for deliberation as soon as possible.