

Animal Release Practices in Hong Kong – Results of a Telephone Survey (June-July 2010)



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Executive Summary

The present survey was undertaken to determine the extent to which some local Buddhist organizations were involved in animal release activities. These activities are carried out as a kind of ritual to bring good luck and fortune to participants and help atone for sins. A telephone survey of 69 organizations was undertaken in June and July 2010. Representatives of 39 organizations were successfully interviewed, of which 14 practiced animal release activities. Comparing the results with those of a similar study undertaken by the University of Hong Kong (HKU) during 2004-2005, both indicated that about one-third of the responding organizations practiced animal release activities, although the sample size is smaller in the present study. In the HKU study, “birds, fish and seafood” (seafood being shellfish, crabs etc.) was the most common category of animals released; however in the present study “fish and seafood” was the predominant category. None of the respondents released only birds in the present study, compared with 22% in the HKU study in 2004-2005, suggesting that releasing birds alone is no longer popular. A number of H5N1 dead birds reported in Hong Kong between 2006-2008 and publicity advising the public “not to release birds” sponsored by the HKSAR Government and environmental NGOs has probably contributed to the decline in bird releases. As the impact of releasing fish and other sea animals on the local marine ecosystem is yet unknown, it is recommended that a detailed study investigates the broad range of species involved, their origins and the likely impact of such practices. Also, a more comprehensive survey on animals for merit release could be undertaken to determine if there are any new trends concerning animal release practices by religious and other groups in Hong Kong. In parallel with any further study, actions should be taken to raise awareness among groups participating in such animal release activities as they may not be fully aware of how they are contributing to welfare issues and the possible detrimental effects that release of animals may have on the local ecology.

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Editors

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Cover photo: A bird release activity at Plover Cove Country Park

Introduction

In some countries with large Buddhist communities, the release of animals (mercy or merit release) is believed not only to bring good luck, health and fortune, but also to help atone for sins and accrue good karma (Blackburn *et al.* 2009). As a result, animal releases are organized by some Buddhist and Taoist groups on a regular basis.

Animal release patterns in Hong Kong were first investigated during a study undertaken by the University of Hong Kong (HKU) between 2004 and 2005, in which results from a telephone questionnaire survey showed that 78 of 229 (34%) organizations practised animal releases, of which 48 (21%) released birds only (Chan, 2006). Birds were the most popular group of animals released according to this study.

During the five years following the study by Chan (2006) and prior to the present study, the HKSAR Government and environmental NGOs have undertaken educational activities in order to increase the awareness of the public regarding the problems associated with animal release. These activities included dialogues with organizations practicing animal release activities, media reports, talks and educational leaflets. These activities in part, were led by concern regarding emergent diseases such as H5N1 bird flu and may have helped to change the community's attitude towards animal release.

In the period of 2006-2008, there were 45 cases of wild birds infected with H5N1, of which 17 were recorded in highly urbanized areas, with a high concentration recorded near Yuen Po Bird Market in Mongkok, the largest live bird market in Hong Kong. Because of this threat to public health, the HKSAR Government advised the public not to release birds. This chain of events, coupled by the conspicuous media coverage, may have caused a change in the animal release pattern with reduced numbers of birds being released.

In fact a recent study noted that the average number of the following “prayer birds” (a collective term used for the four most popular merit-release bird species), Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*), Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*), Scaly-breasted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) and White-rumped Munia (*L. striata*), at Yuen Po Bird Street, Mongkok in 2008-2009 was 1,443 (KFBG, 2011). This was a sharp decrease compared with the findings of the previous HKU study, in which the average was 4,242 birds (Chan, 2006). Both studies used similar methods which involved the counting and identification of all the birds for sale in the bird market on the day of survey. This suggests the demand for prayer birds has decreased in recent years.

Considering the raised public awareness mentioned above, the present study was undertaken to investigate the latest animal release patterns and determine any trends that might be developing regarding involvement by different religious groups. It also sought to determine whether there were any developing trends regarding the animal species being released. Comparison is duly made with the study by Chan (2006). Two key questions will be addressed: (1) whether the level of release activities being undertaken

by religious organizations is similar, and (2) whether birds are still the most popular animal group released.

Methodology

A telephone questionnaire survey directed towards Buddhist and Taoist organizations regarding animal release activities was conducted in June and July 2010. Animal releases by individuals were not studied as they are very difficult to survey and the number of animals involved is much smaller than those undertaken by organized groups.

Contact information for the telephone survey of Buddhist/Taoist organizations was obtained from KFBG department records, telephone directories and the website of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association (<http://www.hkbuddhist.org>). All telephone surveys were conducted by the first author. The interviewer presented herself as someone working on behalf of Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden when conducting the survey. For those who did not answer the phone or refused to answer the questionnaire, calls were made again later in the hope that a positive response would be obtained the second time.

Results

Telephone survey

A total of 69 organizations (67 Buddhist and two Taoist) were contacted. Among these 69 organizations, one was a bookshop which did not organize any activities, one had someone answering the phone who did not have any details of the organization, 15 did not answer the phone and 13 refused to participate in the survey. The remaining 39 organizations participated in the telephone survey and answered the questionnaire.

Among the 39 participating organizations, 14 organized animal release activities (36%), while 25 did not (64%, Table 1). The majority released “fish and seafood” (Table 2). While none carried out “bird only” release activities, four of the groups organized animal release activities that involved birds along with other animals (Table 2).

Table 1. *The number of responding organizations that practiced animal release (% = percentage of total) in the present study compared with the University of Hong Kong study in 2004-2005 (Chan, 2006)*

	Chan (2006)	Present study
The number of organizations that <u>practised</u> animal release	78 (34%)	14 (36%)
The number of organizations that <u>did not</u> practise animal release	151 (66%)	25 (64%)
Total	229 (100%)	39 (100%)

Table 2. *The type of animals released by the responding organizations in the present study compared with the University of Hong Kong study in 2004-2005 (Chan, 2006)*

Animal category	Chan (2006)	Present study
Birds only	17 (22%)	0 (0%)
“Fish and seafood”	16 (21%)	8 (57%)
“Birds, fish and seafood”	29 (37%)	4 (29%)
Other	4 (5%)	0 (0%)
Unknown	12 (15%)	2 (14%)
Total	78 (100%)	14 (100%)

Regarding “fish and seafood” release activities, the release locations included the waters near Sai Kung, Tsing Ma Bridge, Stanley, North Point Pier and the coast of Lamma Island. Of the two responding organizations that also released birds, they generally released birds in the countryside or outside temples.

The number of released animals at each event varied greatly among the respondents. Only two organizations gave the approximate weights of the animals released in an event (Table 3). About half of the respondents said that the number of released animals depended on the number of participants and the amount of donation received, which was at least HK\$10,000 per event. The rest of the respondents could not give concrete answers as they indicated that the value of fish and seafood varied greatly in different seasons and in different places.

Table 3. *The quantity of animals released in each event*

	No of respondents	Percentage of total (%)
About 500 kg	1	7
Hundreds of catties	1	7
Depended on the number of participants and donations	7	50
Not fixed	2	14
No answer	3	22
Total	14	100

Table 4. *The source of animals released in each event*

	No of respondents	Percentage of total (%)
Seafood/bird retail stores	7	50
Reserved by fishermen	4	29
No answer	3	21
Total	14	100

Regarding the source of the animals released in an event, the respondents had purchased animals at different places and from different people (Table 4). Half of respondents purchased animals directly from retailers, of whom two said they tried to prevent shop owners from catching the animals specifically for the release in advance. Four (29%) had ordered fish from fishermen, of whom one said they had ordered fish from a fish nursery. The locations of the retailers were Sai Kung, North Point Pier and South District. As for the birds, one respondent said they had purchased them at Yuen Po Street Bird Market.

Regarding the numbers of participants that attended each event, 57% were attended by less than 200 people, and only 14% by more than 200 people. Four respondents did not answer this part of the questionnaire.

Table 5. *The number of participants attending each event*

Number of people	Number of respondents	Percentage of total (%)
<100	5	36
100-200	3	21
>200	2	14
No answer	4	29
Total	14	100

A comparison between the present study and the telephone survey carried out between 2004-2005 by the University of Hong Kong

In the present study, the percentage of organizations that practised animal release was similar to the findings by Chan (2006) in 2004-2005 (Table 1). In both studies, about one-third of responding organizations practised animal releases. However, the most common combination of released animals in the present study was not “birds, fish and seafood” as recorded by Chan (2006) but “fish and seafood” (Table 2). Also, none of the respondents released only birds, compared with 22% which did so in the earlier study (Chan, 2006). It should be noted that the sample size of Chan (2006) was greater than the present study and the differences (and similarities) observed may, in part, be due to our small sample size.

Discussion

Shift in the types of animals to be released

The present study demonstrated that “fish and seafood” was the most popular combination of animal types to be released, whereas “birds, fish and seafood,” followed by “birds only,” were the most popular in Chan’s study (2006). This change is believed to be associated with the widespread reports of H5N1 infected dead birds in Hong Kong between 2006-2008. These were 45 confirmed cases of birds infected with the H5N1 virus in Hong Kong during that period. The H5N1 cases drew media attention, and close contact with birds was seen as a potential health risk. The Hong Kong SAR Government also warned against bird release because of public health concerns. The same recommendation has also been advocated by environmental NGOs for a number of years (refer to KFBG leaflet attached in Appendix 2). It is highly likely that reduced dependence on birds for release has resulted.

In Taiwan, a similar decline in bird release activities has apparently been reported in recent years (Dr Lucia Severinghaus pers. comm.).

The findings of a study on the prayer-bird trade at Yuen Po Street Bird Market in 2008-2009 (KFBG, 2011) supports this conclusion that there has been a reduction of the number of birds released in religious ceremonial events. The average total of the four “prayer-bird” species recorded in 2008-2009 (average of 1,443 birds per market visit) was just one-third of that recorded by Chan (2006) (average of 4,242 birds per market visit) in 2004-2005. This indicates that fewer prayer birds were for sale in the Bird Market, and fewer birds were released in local events, than several years earlier.

The impact of releasing fish and seafood on the ecosystem in Hong Kong

The present study revealed that “fish and seafood” was now the most popular animal category used in religious releases, and their release locations are spread over the eastern, southern and western waters of Hong Kong. The survival rate of these fish and seafood is not known, but it is expected to be low as the animals concerned were obtained from food markets, where they were usually kept at high density, without proper care and provision of suitable conditions to mimic their natural habitats. The detailed requirements of the released animals are usually not considered in typical animal release events, as large numbers of fish and seafood of a multitude of species are thrown off the boats. The impact of hitting the water alone could cause serious injury to the animals. They may, on the other hand, carry disease from the artificially crowded food-market conditions.

Sample size in the present study

This study was undertaken by the first author during an internship at KFBG in June and July 2010. Due to time constraints, the sample size was smaller than that in Chan’s study (2006). However, the study still provides a general picture of the present trends reflected by these animal release events in Hong Kong, which suggest a shift from release of birds toward increased use of fish and seafood in releases.

Recommendations

In view of the changing nature of release activities in Hong Kong and other external circumstances, such as outbreaks of emerging diseases like Avian Influenza, it would seem appropriate for study to be undertaken to see if any trends are developing and to make further comparisons with the two previous studies. It is also recommended that a more detailed study on the release of fish and seafood be carried out, which would also provide more insight into the range of animal species collectively called ‘seafood’. The study should include the species involved, their origins, and the likely impact of their release on our marine ecosystem. Information regarding survival of animals and the suitability of release areas for different species should also be considered. In addition to further study of this subject, immediate actions could focus on raising awareness among the merit release groups about issues such as animal welfare and the potential harm that can be caused by releasing un-quarantined and non-native animal species on the local ecology.

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Appendix

Telephone Survey Questionnaire

Name of Organization:

- 1) Does your organization hold animal release activities? (Yes, No)
- 2) What kinds of animals are used? (Birds, Fish, Seafood, Snakes, Turtles, Others)
– Which is the most common? (Birds, Fish, Seafood, Snakes, Turtles, Others)
- 3) Are any special or precious species used?
- 4) How many animals are released at one time?
- 5) Where do you release the animals?
- 6) What is the cost of each individual animal?
- 7) Where did you obtain the animal for release? (Bird shops, markets, dealers, others)
- 8) How many times do you carry out release activities in a year?
- 9) Are there any specific dates that you undertake release activities? (e.g. Buddha's birthday, Kwun Yum birthday)
- 10) How many participants attend each event?

Remarks/Notes:

About KFBG

Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) is situated in the rural New Territories, on the northern slopes of Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest mountain. Two steep spurs enclose its deep-set valley. Within KFBG are streams, woodlands, orchards, vegetable gardens, walking trails, live animal exhibits, floral exhibits, sustainable agriculture demonstration plots, art exhibits, a wild animal rescue centre, a native tree nursery, and, other conservation and education facilities.

In the post-war years, Hong Kong was flooded with destitute refugees. Many had traditional knowledge of crop production and livestock farming but no stock, others had land but no experience. They required support to rebuild their lives. The farm site at Pak Ngau Shek was established in 1956 as a base for livestock breeding and distribution, agricultural research, farmers training, public education and recreation. The barren slopes were terraced and planted with orchards and vegetable gardens. The development of the botanic garden began in 1963 and the plant conservation programme from 1972.

On 20th January, 1995, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong passed an Ordinance (Chapter 1156) incorporating KFBG as a non-profit corporation designated as a conservation and education centre. It is a unique public-private partnership, for while the KFBG Corporation is a public organisation, it is privately funded by the Kadoorie Foundation.

Since 1995, KFBG has been conducting a wide range of nature education, nature conservation and sustainable living programmes both on-site, and, throughout Hong Kong and South China.

In this time of severe global crisis KFBG raises awareness, undertakes rigorous science-based species conservation and ecosystem restoration, and offers new ways of thinking and living to respond to the world's problems. Hence, our work brings hope and improvement by focusing on nature conservation, sustainable living and holistic education that re-connects people with nature. By working together with the public, Governments, academia, NGOs and businesses, we can protect our common future.

Our mission is to harmonise our relationship with the environment. Our vision is a world in which people live sustainably with respect for each other and nature.

