

6th June 2005

To: Yvonne Lim, Voices & Commentaries editor, TODAY
From: Deirdre Moss, Executive Officer, SPCA

I refer to the commentary 'Anti-animal abuse rules lack bite' (TODAY, 1st June 2005) and the subsequent letters by readers.

There is a serious problem of unwanted, abused and abandoned animals in Singapore. This reflects poorly on our society, but the authorities must share responsibility. The SPCA has written repeatedly to the government asking for effective and humane solutions to the problem. But in reply to our request for tighter rules on the sale and breeding of pets, the authorities have told us that they believe that "*standards in the pet industry will improve more expeditiously through industry self-regulation*". This is wishful thinking. With little legislation or incentive to behave responsibly, the pet trade industry's focus will be on profit at the expense of animal welfare. The frequently poor and exploitative conditions in pet shops and breeding farms are heart-breaking proof.

Hence, it is no surprise that so many animals are bred, imported and sold in Singapore. To take one example, thousands of Red-eared sliders (often called terrapins) are sold in pet shops each year. Potential owners are rarely told that the sliders' tiny size is deceiving because they can grow to the size of dinner plates. They are then often abandoned in reservoirs, parks, and ponds, upsetting the balance of the ecosystem by competing with indigenous species.

The SPCA has made several suggestions to the government. We have suggested prohibiting the sale of pets to those aged 16 years and under. The RSPCA has lobbied for similar laws in the U.K. We have also asked that a known offender and person who has previously subjected animals and birds to cruel treatment/illegal importation, be barred from such businesses as animal or bird farming. This would prevent another appalling tragedy like the case of Indah Fauna, where the farm licensee was given an in-principle license to breed dogs despite having prior convictions of international smuggling of endangered and exotic species which had also been mistreated in the process. It was later discovered that his farm had over 100 dogs in filthy conditions, with flies and faeces everywhere.

The SPCA agrees that education is important. But education is only part of the solution. Without effective laws and enforcement, the problem of unwanted, abused, and abandoned animals will never be solved. Acknowledging this obvious fact and prioritizing what needs to be done is within the capabilities of the authorities. The government plays a key role, as animal welfare organizations and animal lovers cannot do it by themselves. It is only effective government action that can reduce the problem through tightening existing rules for pet shop licensing, commercial importation, sale and breeding of pets. There is also a need for stronger enforcement when rules are breached and when abuse cases are uncovered.