

BEHAVIOURAL ENRICHMENT COALITION

SUBMISSION TO SUBCOMMITTEE ON ISSUES RELATING TO ANIMAL WELFARE AND CRUELTY TO ANIMALS - MARCH 2016

I represent the Behavioural Enrichment Coalition and we are grateful for the opportunity to participate in this meeting.

Our specific area of interest relates to the welfare of wild animals kept in captivity in Hong Kong. To our knowledge this has never been raised before and it seems that currently no provision is made for captive animal welfare under the Administration's policy on Animal Welfare and Management.

The Government's policy objective on animal management is to ensure that animals and people co-exist in a harmonious way in Hong Kong. We note the Governments' willingness to explore new approaches to the further promotion of animal welfare, and in line with this we wish to submit that Captive Animal Welfare be acknowledged as one area which needs further support and investigation.

In July 2014, the LCSD held a Public Forum regarding the future of the HKZBG, at which various ideas and view points were expressed and noted. One of those was the phasing out of animal exhibits at the HKZBG, leading to eventual closure of the Zoo. To date however, no findings resulting from the Public Forum have been released and it would appear that the Zoo will continue. If this is indeed the long term goal of the LCSD, then we submit that there is an urgent need to address strategies for improvement of the welfare of the wild animals under their care.

Contemporary Animal Welfare for captive animals recognises the following 5 areas as characteristics which form the basis for good animal welfare and we feel that these 5 general principles should be incorporated into the Governments' Policy document on Animal Management.

1. Nutrition - Ready access to appropriate food and fresh water
2. Environment - Which provides shelter from the elements, areas for rest and allows species appropriate activity.
3. Health - Monitoring and provision of veterinary care to treat injury, pain, stress or disease.
4. Behaviour - The freedom to express natural behaviour and choice, in the company of other animals if appropriate.
5. Mental state - This addresses the growing certainty that consciousness (the capacity for awareness of pleasant and/or unpleasant feelings) is present in a wide range of species, and needs to be taken into account when determining their welfare.

It has been well demonstrated and documented that in order to adequately meet these general principles it is essential to implement a sustainable and comprehensive Behavioural Enrichment program. This is the provision of species-appropriate challenges, opportunities and stimulation to captive animals, and is now widely recognised as a basic principle of zoo and aquarium animal husbandry. It promotes animals' mental and physical health by enabling them to engage in behaviours that give rise to a range of positive experiences. It should be embedded in the daily management of all captive animals. However, this is not being practised at the HKZBG.

The Behavioural Enrichment Coalition has been working with the HKZBG on a voluntary basis since August 2015, on an experimental project to provide weekly enrichment to the 5 highly intelligent orangutans kept there. The specific aim is to improve their welfare by providing enrichment which would encourage natural behaviours such as foraging, manipulating objects, problem solving and appropriate socialisation in order to improve their mental states.

We are grateful to the Management and Staff of the HKZBG as well as the LCSD for facilitating this initial project. It has been well received by the animals, and we have also observed the very positive response from visitors to the zoo, when they see the animals interact with their enrichment items.

Our goal is for the provision of Behavioural Enrichment to be expanded to include all animals at the zoo, and that this would become incorporated into the daily procedural management of the zoo.

However, we have observed certain constraints which will prevent the expansion and implementation of this project and thus negatively affect the welfare of the animals.

The most significant constraints we have perceived are:

1. The inadequate number of qualified staff to successfully carry out the work required to implement a comprehensive Behavioural Enrichment programme.
2. Lack of staff qualified in Animal Husbandry and zoo-keeping.
3. The constant rotation of staff from within the LCSD, prohibits continuity in projects such as those which rely on building stable relationships with the animals, for example, training them to facilitate effective health monitoring without the need for sedation and stress - an extremely important part of their welfare.

The above issues would require changes in the way the Zoo is administered, but we feel if implemented as soon as possible, this would significantly help in improving the welfare of these captive animals.