



Tradition Gone Awry

The commercialization of an ancient ritual wreaks havoc on wildlife around the world

As a child living in Taiwan, Shu-Jen Chen was enthralled by the colorful “fang-sheng” celebrations where Buddhists purchased caged animals and—in a gesture of compassion to all creatures—set them free.

“It was all done so cheerfully,” says Chen. “It seemed so wonderful because we thought the animals were in pens to be killed or eaten, and they were giving these animals a better life.”

But this illusion didn’t survive into adulthood, when Chen, a campaign manager for Humane Society International, looked below the surface of modern fang-sheng ceremonies, also known as mercy releases. What she discovered—that the practice traumatizes and kills millions of animals and disrupts native ecosystems—has Chen poised to help launch an HSI campaign to stop the abuses.

The Buddhist tradition of mercy release is based on the belief that freeing a captive animal creates good karma, bringing the person and the animal good fortune in this life and better prospects for the next

incarnation. The custom began centuries ago when monks spontaneously rescued animals and their actions were memorialized in religious texts. But as early as the 16th century, critics in China complained that mercy release as practiced was a corruption of the original intent, says Wu Hung, HSI partner and founder of the Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan.

Today, mercy release is a multimillion dollar enterprise, says Hung, practiced by Buddhists around the world but bearing only a superficial resemblance to the impromptu acts of kindness its practitioners



Animals are often packed into crates for days or weeks before their release into an unfamiliar environment.

are emulating. Large temples purchase hundreds or thousands of wild animals to be “freed” in a single day, and a thriving industry has sprung up around the farming, trapping, import, and sale of the wildlife. Birds, fish, and turtles are the most commonly used animals, but a wide variety of species—native and imported—are victims of the trade.

Of the untold millions of wild animals trapped for mercy release ceremonies each year, only a fraction survive capture and transport, when they’re commonly kept in tightly packed crates for days or weeks. Those who do survive often collapse from exhaustion, illness, or injury soon after release, becoming easy targets for predators. Others die after they’re set loose in inappropriate habitats; freshwater turtles may be tossed into oceans, and saltwater fish may be placed in ponds or rivers. In some cases, says Hung, the animals’ freedom is only temporary, as hunters wait just beyond the release sites to recapture the weak and disoriented animals for consumption or resale.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Even when animals manage to thrive after release, other creatures may suffer as a result. Animals are often freed thousands of miles from their natural ranges, in groups large enough to establish breeding populations. They can spread diseases to native species, compete for food and territory, or mate with indigenous species, threatening their survival. In Taiwan, where an estimated 200 million wild or captive-bred animals are released each year, all but two of the 51 major rivers contain alien species, while indigenous fish have nearly disappeared from some waterways, including the country's famous Sun Moon Lake.

Despite the widespread impacts, few who participate in mercy release ceremonies realize that their kind intentions can have cruel consequences—or that the animals they're ransoming from captivity were captured for the sole purpose of being released. Even when the animals flap helplessly on the ground or float belly up in the water, people believe they're doing a benevolent thing, says Chen. "There's a Chinese saying, 'Keep one eye open and the other eye shut,' and that's what they're doing with mercy release."

But Chen and Hung won't let this myopic view persist. Using video footage and investigative reports, they're already winning allies within Buddhist communities. This fall, they'll launch a campaign to educate people about the animal suffering and environmental damage caused by commercialized mercy release, and they'll lobby government bodies to ban the practice. The campaign will begin in Taiwan and then expand to other countries with large Buddhist populations, including the U.S.

Part of the campaign's strategy involves redirecting the spirit of mercy release toward practices consistent with the Buddha's teaching of respect for all living beings. After all, says Chen, with the growing numbers of animal protection and habitat preservation organizations around the world, there's no lack of opportunities for people to help animals—and perhaps earn a bit of good karma in the process.

— *Julie Falconer*



Former puppy mill dog Sugar Bowl has a new life with Indiana Rep. Linda Lawson's granddaughter, Genavive.

A Fairy Tale Ending

Legislator Gives Second Chance to a Puppy Mill Dog

Animal lovers descended on a Mauckport, Ind., puppy mill near the Kentucky border in early June to save 240 dogs. Among the rescue team members was someone with an unusual resumé: six terms as a legislator in the Indiana statehouse.

Wearing a yellow Animal Rescue T-shirt, Rep. Linda Lawson helped move dogs from their cages onto trucks that would take them to a nearby emergency shelter. It wasn't the first time she'd tried to alleviate animal suffering; Lawson had spent the past year fighting against puppy mills in a different arena, pushing for legislation to make it harder for these mass breeding facilities to operate in Indiana.

A 2007 recipient of The HSUS's Humane State Legislator Award, Lawson has a history of effective advocacy for animal bills, and H.E.A. 1468 was no exception. She showed pictures of puppy mill dogs on the House floor and fought hard as puppy mill interests tried to weaken the bill. Signed into law in May, the legislation took effect July 1.

"If we had anyone other than Representative Lawson as a sponsor, this all would have been dead a long time ago," says Anne Sterling, Indiana state director for The HSUS.

Soon after the victory, Lawson got a visceral reminder of why she has worked so hard to help dogs trapped in puppy mills.

When Sterling invited her to join The HSUS's convoy to southern Indiana on June 2, the legislator jumped at the chance. As she worked, Lawson saw large groups of dogs living in igloo-shaped plastic shelters with a single point of entry and breeding dogs stacked in cages kept inside the house.

One dog in particular caught her eye.



Lawson volunteers at a raid.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: LINDA LAWSON; KATHY MILAN/THE HSUS. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ESTATE OF LILLIAN WILDE; FRANK LOFTUS/THE HSUS