

The SOS Project: A Solution to the Problems of Stray Animals in the Temple Compound.

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An ideal temple has spiritual, intellection and social purposes and the head monk is often a community leader. A Buddhist temple in a Thai community has many functions: a place for worship, dharma practice, religious ceremonies and merit making, educational institution both for monks and laymen, monk residence, community center, a place of art and culture and a place where advice and assistance are sought.

As for its social function, the temples are expected to provide certain assistance for homeless and poor people, orphans, handicapped people, stray animals and unwanted pets. Moreover, one way to make merit in the Buddhist culture is to set free such animals as birds, fish, cows and buffaloes from slaughter houses and usually these animals are left at a temple. As Buddhism teaches compassion, respect for all living things and non-violence, most temples do not turn away helpless people and animals. Thus, Thai Buddhist temples share social responsibility in taking care of stray animals, which the Thai people call “temple dogs and cats” And a lot of monks do feel sympathy for the animals and graciously assume the responsibility in feeding them.

The temple’s responsibility and problems arising from stray animals are

1. Providing food and medical care.
2. Dealing with the multiplying number of the animals.
3. Dealing with hygienic problems, such as threat of rabies, keeping the temple compound clean and so on.
4. Keeping the temple itself which has architectural or cultural significance undamaged

The temple, like other sectors of Thai society, either seeks help from the Bangkok Municipality or leaves the problems unattended.

Formerly, the Bangkok Municipality used to round up stray dogs and “put them to sleep”. But research has proved that the number of stray animals keeps increasing. Moreover, with Buddhist background, most Thai people feel that such solution to the problem of stray animals creates a moral dilemma. Later it changed the policy and the animals are transferred to a shelter but many problems arise such as the problems of management, the lack of efficient animal care-takers, funding and hygiene.

Various groups of people who have worked to help stray animals try to find a more efficient and realistic way to solve the problem. One group called “Bonding of All Things Living” has created a new approach which aims at controlling the stray animal population by sterilization and returning them to the location they are from, where there are usually some animal lovers to take care of them.

The approach is developed into “Save Our Stray Project” whose missions are

1. Controlling the animal population by sterilization and providing necessary medical care such as rabies vaccination.
2. Working with animal lovers in the community to make it possible for the spayed animals to remain where they have lived.
3. Negotiating with people who hate animals and those who love and care for them to find a compromise that solves the problem of stray animals in that community, based on the principle of compassion and peaceful coexistence.
4. Promoting collaboration among government sectors, private organizations, community leaders or community administrative body. And most importantly, promoting participation of ordinary people from all walks of life to help them become aware that they can share social responsibility and contribute to their community even though they do not have money.
5. Supporting the movements to improve and enforce the law concerning animal rights and welfare
6. Promoting kindness and responsibility toward animals by means of giving information or education, especially among children.

“Pra Promkunapon Payut Payutto” a much revered monk, once said that the Thai society should try to turn crises into opportunity. His idea can be applied to the problem of stray animals, mostly dogs, at the Thai temple.

Temple dogs are uniquely Thai, so unique that the term “ma-wat” or temple dogs has become a common expression in the Thai language, meaning a lowly person. They become part of the Thai society, adapting themselves to life in the big city. They can be seen begging for food, crossing the street at the zebra-crossing or the pedestrian bridge. They are endlessly grateful to anyone who throws them bits of food and assume the duty of the guards of the lane where people leave left-over food and a bowl of fresh water at their house gate for the poor animals. A project, in fact, was initiated to train stray dogs to be of use to the people and these animals worked side by side with their human colleagues to help the victims or the tsunami in the South.

Also in solving any problem, one should take into consideration the Thai way of life which is characterized by Buddhist teaching of compassion, sharing, tolerance and respect for all living things and moral responsibility toward them. With these reasons, the SOS approach should be adopted as a solution to the problem of stray animals as it is based on compassion and non-violence. With the help of the lay people, the stray animals, the “temple dogs and cats”, should be

spayed and given necessary annual vaccination such as rabies shots and allowed to stay in the temples where monks can take care of them. The important thing is that animal lovers should do everything they can to share the temple's responsibility. There must be a collaboration between the temple and the people. In this way, the problem of stray animals in the temple as a cultural site will be taken care of and this will set an example to other cultural and tourist sites.

It is important that the temple be a true cultural site in the real sense of the word. A true cultural site should not be assessed by the sum of national income it contributes to as a tourist spot. A temple should not be reduced to commercial goods, which can be sold to tourists. It should not be used as the backdrop of a fashion show which was once attempted at the Temple of Dawn. An order to get rid of temple dogs and cats should not be issued to please the tourists. The Thai people in the past gave their best to the temple; it is the expression of the best in our people. The temple is the sum of the best in the Thai people artistically, intellectually and spiritually. Let the temple, the icon of spirituality and Thai Culture, be where life which is much valued by Buddhism is given a chance, especially the life of those dumb beasts who suffer and cannot speak for themselves. Let the temple dogs and cats be the testimony to compassion, the real foundation and the real beauty of Thai culture.



Culture should be alive; it should not be something dead of which dead of which the true meaning is lost in the whirl od global competition for economic growth and consumers' demand. Culture should be touched, seen, heard, felt, appreciated and connects. Culture should connect peoples. And so should tourism.

Tourism should not be only about making money. It should also be a means that brings people together in the environment that communicate the best in one people to the open heart of other peoples. It should bring out the best in us all. And the best in the Thai people, I believe, is the kind heart that feels the suffering of the others and the gentle hand that reaches out to help.

Let the temple, the icon of spirituality and Thai culture, be where one can find the kind heart and the gentle hand. Let the temple dig be the testimony to compassion, the real foundation of Thai culture.

The Bonding of All Things living