

Officialdom versus volunteerism

A longstanding conflict between officials concerned and a couple running an animal rescue centre comes to a head

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Officials from wildlife conservation, drug regulatory authority, and residents of Yusipang are at loggerheads with an

animal rescue centre in Yusipang, Thimphu.

The bone of contention is that Bhutanese officials feel the couple, who run Pilou medical centre, violated existing conservation and

medicines laws.

Wildlife conservation officials said the couple kept 20 Assamese macaques (monkeys) in captivity without permit from department of forest and park services.

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"It's a matter of serious concern, as the animals are wild and shouldn't be reared and retained."

The official said rearing wild animal contravenes section 22 B of the Forest and Nature Conservation Act, which states all wild animals, not listed in schedule I, are also protected and may not be killed, injured, destroyed, captured, collected or otherwise taken.

The Cabinet in 2008 allowed the couple, Hendrik Visser and Marianne Louise Michele Gullet, to run a nonprofit and charitable animal rescue centre and hospital in Hejo. The then Cabinet secretary, Sherub Tenzin, send the directives to the ministry of foreign affairs.

The couple claimed to have treated several animals, both wild and domestic, since then. Besides the Assamese macaques, there are about 200 dogs in their compound today.

The then agriculture minister, Pema Gyamtsho, in April 2009, asked the couple to update the status of the work, along with the summary of accounts, source and amount of funding, expenditure incurred, and staff strength.

Several correspondences were then exchanged between forestry officials and the couple. In May 2013, a technical advisory committee levied a fine of Nu 125,000 on the couple for retaining and rearing the monkeys.

Drug regulatory authority officials said the couple is operating an unauthorised medical



Dogs in the centre in Yusipang

centre.

In June 2009, drug inspectors found 195 items of unregistered drugs and 36 expired medicines at the centre, which was then operating in Serbithang, Thimphu. Similarly, DRA officials detected unregistered and expired drugs at the centre the following year too, when it shifted to Hejo.

In May 6 this year, 25 cartons of drugs, containing more than 100 items, were embargoed.

Officials said they contravened sections 19.2, 24.1, 25 and 26 of Bhutan Medicines Act 2003.

DRA officials also said the couple was not competent and

licensed to practise. According to the act, only a qualified person, who should have a minimum of diploma in veterinary science, and be registered with the authority, could store, distribute, and dispense.

"The couple had neither registered their centre with the authority, nor have the minimum required qualification," a DRA official said.

But the then interim advisor to ministry of agriculture and forest, Lyonpo Om Pradhan, in his recommendation, advised the department of forests and parks to take the operation as legal, as the Cabinet approved the establishment of the centre.

In Yusipang, residents complained of the menace dogs presented to their farms and cattle. They also alleged that, while the couple cut their water pipes, depriving them of water, the dogs contaminated their water source.

An immediate neighbour to the centre, Namgay, said he lost cattle to the dogs, and is now scared that the dogs might attack them.

The Yusipang tshogpa had written to gewog conveying the villagers' complaint, but said the couple had not paid any heed.

Hendrik Visser and Marianne Gullet, however, said the issue needs a process, where the parties involved should sit around and find a solution.

They said they were rescuing monkey and animals for almost 18 years, and it's a process that evolved when they were in Zhemgang, when they started rescuing all kinds of animals.

They said it was not their intention to come to Bhutan and set something up but, after 18 years of rescuing animals, it evolved through the years.

"The two species, macaques and stray dogs, are more subject to suffering," Hendrik said. Stray dogs suffer because of neglect, over population, lack of access to food, and they become victims of car accidents and diseases. The monkeys at the centre, they claimed, were victims of human-wildlife conflict.

They said nobody was doing anything to rescue the animal before they started. "We decided to take the responsibility and

educate ourselves and deal with the monkeys and also the dogs," Hendrik said.

"All of those monkeys were rescued from truck drivers from India in Bhutan, school teachers in Trashiyangtse, who normally take the guardian role for the macaques," Marianne added.

They said, in the past, they developed a re-socialisation program for the monkeys, and started a reintegration program, where the monkeys would no longer feel dependent on humans but survive as groups.

"An individual macaque has no chance to survive and, since all of them have been captured as babies, they have no survival skills," Hendrik said.

Hendrik said the issue today is how to formalise the work they have been doing, how to find a permanent solution and how to establish a permanent structure in Bhutan that could house rescued wild animals.

Marianne said the monkeys could not be released because they are domesticated, some were burnt and some handicapped. "Some had their teeth removed. These monkeys have no way of defending themselves and feeding in the wild."

The funding, the couple claimed, was done through personal financing. "We have people in the market, who donate food and people in the streets bring dogs to us," Marianne said.

They said they work in partnership with a non-governmental organisation, Bhutan Animal Rescue Centre, where Hendrik is the board member and Marianne is the executive secretary.

Hendrik said he is a sociologist and has studied human behaviour, which is similar to macaques. He also has certificates to rescue primates and he said, he knows how to deal with the animal, how to reintegrate and re-socialise.

Marianne said it was a personal issue with her. It was not 200 dogs coming to her at once. The sick dogs were brought to her. She also said she is a veterinary technician, holds a philosophy doctorate in social geography that has to do with wildlife.

"We solved many complicated cases," Hendrik said.