

Work done out of love

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Teaching compassion

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Many children – and sometimes even teachers – do not see animals as conscious creatures with feelings very much the same as ours. Our education officer has on occasion been asked to deal with incidents where children have been torturing animals ‘for fun’ ... throwing stones, kicking, beating, dragging, and hurting unmercifully in various ways.

While many children are naturally kind to animals, some are not and have to be taught. We know from experience that it is possible to do this, and that most children will respond, even though occasionally one or two will not and sometimes will not hesitate to say so, possibly out of bravado.

Our project, while teaching about the work of the SPCA and how to look after animals, also teaches about animal consciousness and the need to treat all living creatures with respect. Our project emphasises that being compassionate brings self-respect and a feeling that what one does matters. This is really important in a world in which people are often suffering abuse; farm animals tend to be treated as mere products; and animals in general are viewed by many as ‘things’ without feelings or thought processes.

We frequently ask ourselves how much difference our SPCA project is making to the lives of animals, since we know that some of the children will themselves be in desperate need of kindness and compassion. But the fundamental values of the project are picked up in the spontaneous responses and notes our education officer receives from children and teachers, from questions asked during the workshops, from feedback gleaned during later return visits, and from the dawning recognition in many children that being kind to animals really matters and is just as important as being kind to people one cares about.

How dogs smell

Depending on the breed, dogs' sense of smell is a hundred to tens of thousands of times better than that of human beings. Our noses have 3cm² of olfactory membrane. A dog with a highly developed sense of smell, like a bloodhound, has about 150cm² of sense-scenting material in its nose. Dogs have as much as forty times as many scent-producing cells in their brains as we do. They are also able to remember smells for long after scenting them.

They have an organ in the nasal cavity called Jacobson's Organ which combines taste and smell, so that they literally "taste the air". Jacobson's Organ has two fluid-filled sacs that enable dogs to smell and taste simultaneously. A dog involved in doing this will have its mouth slightly open. This is called a "Flehman Reaction" and is noticeable, for instance, when a dog scents another dog's urine.

Dogs can move their nostrils independently and are able to discern where a scent is coming from. This ability is significant when it recognises a scent and follows a trail. Its wet nose enhances its sense of smell by capturing "scent particles".

A dog's sense of smell is very different of our own. Its nose is its primary sense organ and tells the animal a whole story. When it smells another dog's urine or catches its scent, it can tell whether the other dog is male or female, is pregnant or has recently given birth, something about where it has recently been, its mood, and even what it has recently eaten.

The scenting ability of dogs is breathtakingly sensitive, and they can be trained to sniff out cadavers, drugs, explosives, and diseases like diabetes and malignant tumours, and can also sniff out disaster survivors who would die if not detected in time.

More bears rescued from bile farms

SPCA volunteer Sandy Harvey began some while back to keep us updated on the splendid work being done by the Animals Asia Foundation in trying to stop the iniquitous bear bile industry in China and Vietnam.

The latest Animals Asia Review is heartening. Fourteen more bears were rescued from bear bile farms. The organisation reports that the bears arrived "crushed in body and spirit after years of abuse in cramped cages" in addition to the savage physical pain endured during the capturing of their bile.

Thanks to the Animals Asia Foundation, hundreds of animals trapped in zoos in China and Vietnam have also had their lives improved. Where they had only concrete floors and metal bars in their environment, they have been provided with ropes and platforms, toys and puzzle feeders – small pleasures in lives of total confinement, which should never be the fate of wild animals, but they nonetheless mean a great deal to the animals, including lions, tigers and macaques, who previously lived without any stimulation at all.

The organisation also reports steady progress in trying to end the "terrible cat and dog meat trade" right across China. The cruelty involved appals us, but we must not distance ourselves from cruel practices in the meat industry in our own country – including battery chickens, sow pens, transport conditions that cause suffering to animals, and inhuman practices at some abattoirs. |

The free-range issue

The availability of free-range animal products is diminishing. The more people who demand free-range meat and eggs, the more available free-range products will become

and at more acceptable prices. If everyone who can afford to do so purchases the free-range option, what a huge difference it would make.

One way of making it possible is to decide to spend the same amount on free-range meat as one would normally spend on non-free-range, but be willing to have a smaller quantity of meat on the dinner plate.

Demanding that the authorities regularly check up on abattoirs is another essential practice that should concern meat-eaters.