

## May online column

*The Animal Angle* - Shirley Bell

### The “double purpose” of the SPCA

Along with its role in animal welfare, the SPCA plays another important role in society that is perhaps not quite as obvious. I was paging through *Who cares for Animals, 150 years of the RSPCA* by Antony Brown, written way back in 1974, when I came across a paragraph that described what Brown calls the SPCA’s “double purpose” from its inception.

When the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in England opened in 1824, it was the first organisation of its kind in the world. It had to deal with so-called ‘sports’ like cock-fighting and bull-baiting and with cruel practices like the whipping of exhausted horses pulling heavy loads through city streets. All of these acts of cruelties were commonplace at the time.

It is a pitiful indictment that in 2015 we are still dealing with many issues of collective cruelty, like organised deadly dog-fights in some areas of our country and having pet dogs stolen and transported across our borders for this disgusting so-called ‘sport’ which the media report as being popular in, for instance, parts of Angola. Vehicles containing stolen dogs have been stopped by the police before crossing our borders, but it is known that more escape unnoticed. The fate of these dogs is too horrible to describe.

When the Duke of Windsor spoke at the centenary of the RSPCA in 1924, he said: “When a man protects an animal from ill-treatment, his kindly deed reacts upon his own character and makes him a better citizen. In contemplating what the RSPCA is doing for animals, we should not lose sight of the humanising effect of its work on the hearts of the community.” These days we would speak of “people” rather than “a man” and we are more concerned with encouraging men, women and children to be compassionate human beings rather than just better citizens, but the message itself remains as valid as it was in 1924.

The double role of the SPCA has never been clearer than it is today when one would expect that greater knowledge and access to information would have made society better able to recognise the interconnectedness of all life and the desperate need for compassion for all living creatures. If the SPCA had its way, every abandoned animal would find a new, loving home, so that no animal would be euthanased. There would be no deliberate callousness or cruelty. Humans would all be humane. But that is not the kind of world we live in, so the SPCA continues to play the same vital role in society that was visualised in a London coffee house when the first SPCA was founded on a June evening in 1824 on the basis of an aim that was “highly unfashionable in those days”: to prevent the often “monstrous cruelties” being carelessly inflicted on many animals.

Have people on the whole become kinder to animals? I think we can say that is generally true. One of the reasons that there is a general improvement is owing to the much wider recognition of animal sentience, that it is cruel to hurt them and callous to neglect them, that life is precious to all living creatures, and that the love of an animal brings something special to our lives. Animal welfare bodies have played a significant role in awakening consciences and teaching people how to appreciate and look after animals responsibly, but much work remains to be done.

The Durban & Coast SPCA is greatly aware of its “double purpose” and of the importance of its role not only in active animal welfare, but in reaching people’s hearts. Beyond the sadness of animal cruelty, the ill-treatment of animals is now recognised as having serious consequences for both individuals and society. Cruelty to animals is a step along the path that leads to the death of compassion and to conscienceless commission of deeds of violence.

The support given us by the public, our sponsors and our valued volunteers is what makes our “double purpose” possible and has consequences far more far-reaching than might be realised.

### **Begging the question about ‘factory’ farming**

A *Mercury* interview with the CEO of the SA Poultry Association on 25 March provided information on issues like the nutritional values of eggs, the variety of commercial feeds for poultry, the still inadequate control exercised via the Agricultural Products Standards Act regarding free-range products, the (obvious) reasons why free range eggs are more expensive than ‘factory-farmed’ eggs, and the fact that, contrary to the professional nutritional advice given us for decades, there is almost no evidence linking dietary cholesterol intake to the cholesterol level of one’s blood.

There was a brief mention of the fact that some people get “hot under the collar” regarding “farming methods around egg production”. Free-range poultry farming is described as “where chickens run around foraging for their food versus ‘factory’ where they are kept in cages and given feed”. It would have been preferable to have said nothing at all on this issue rather than give this deceptive information. Those who are not ignorant of the ‘factory’ method of poultry ‘production’ are aware that the cages are no larger than the size of an A4 page and are very far from being the ‘fowl runs’ that some might imagine.

This is an industry that really needs to be strongly controlled owing to widespread abusive methods of production. In some instances, debeaking of the birds takes place. The bottom of the tiny cage is made of wire so that faeces can fall through. The chickens are therefore forced to perch on wire mesh. They never see the sun. They never scratch in the dust. They cannot stretch their wings. Take a moment to imagine what life under such conditions must be like for these living, feeling creatures and - unless you are on a really tight budget - consider whether the cents saved on buying battery eggs are worth it.

On 6 April, the *Mercury* printed a letter by Trish Edwards of Assagay in which she pleaded for consumer pressure to help change bad practices in the poultry industry. She referred particularly to the “deplorable condition of the laying hens at Edenrock Poultry farm as described in Leanne Jansen’s article (*The Mercury*, April 1)”. This distressing finding “provides great incentive to buy only free-range eggs”. Recognising that the added cost is often the deciding factor, she suggests that those who decide to purchase eggs laid by ‘battery’ birds should “educate themselves as to where the eggs are being sourced from and refuse to buy from farms like this one...”

We need to ensure, she says, that our favourite supermarkets buy responsibly and use only those “battery laying establishments” that have the best track record “and the least history of cruelty”. It would be a simple matter, she says, to write to one’s local store to ask them to confirm in writing that they do source their eggs from responsible producers.

There will be those who will query Trish's reference to "the least history of cruelty", with its implication that elements of cruelty cannot be avoided in the battery method of 'factory' production. But try to imagine yourself into the life cycle of chickens condemned to live under such appalling conditions. Even the most careful commercial battery bird production cannot avoid cruelty, because it is built into the very mode of production.

The SPCA continually speaks out against many aspects of factory farming, as those who read our newsletters, flyers and *The Animal Angle*, know. We know all the 'practical' arguments for the production of battery birds for both eggs and meat. These do not make it right. Consider this: even the fowl pecking in sparse grass around a poor rural dwelling has a far better life than any battery bird. It is free to run around, to feel the sun, to live with its own kind, to raise chicks, to scratch in the dust. It might not be as well-fed, but its body will be free from chemical additives. It will finally meet the inevitable fate of the cooking pot, but will have not led a torturous existence in a wire cage in which it could not even properly flap its wings.

If you can afford to purchase free-range poultry and eggs, don't try to save a small amount of money that you will very likely spend without a thought on something else like a cup of coffee or leaving your lights on in empty rooms. And if you can't afford free-range products, do what Trish Edwards suggests and find out something about the supplier of your store's poultry products before you give them your patronage. Details of most suppliers can be found on the Internet.

### **Snake cams**

Those who read *The Animal Angle*, or follow the dedicated strivings of the Durban & Coast SPCA to do all it can for animals in need, will know the vital role a snake cam plays in rescuing animals, especially kittens and puppies, that have fallen down into drains or sewers. The only way we know of these horrifying incidents is when someone reports hearing despairing whimpering coming from under the ground. Sometimes the small creature will have wandered a considerable way along the piping system, but once the SPCA knows about it, our team will never give up.

Whole gardens have been dug up, concrete has been undermined, rescuers have worked through days and nights. We have called on the ever-helpful Fire Department or on private companies that possess a snake cam. Yes, we do have one of our own, but it is presently unusable, and we have so far not been successful in procuring a replacement for a faulty part.

*We urgently need another snake cam.* In fact, ideally we require *six* snake cams, one for each of our inspectors. Precious lives depend on it. If you able to donate towards this expensive piece of equipment, know that you will be helping to save the lives of the little ones who are unfortunate enough to fall down uncovered drains and be helplessly trapped in fear and darkness and without access to nourishment. Their lives might be saved by this piece of technology, because the SPCA never gives up on a rescue bid.

If you read up about snake cams, you will find that they are used to locate creatures that live underground and whose lives are normally hidden from us. Since snake cams carry a light, we are privileged to be able to see the secret lives of creatures like snakes, spiders, worms, insects, and all the species that live in burrows. This is great educational technology. But a snake cam also allows animal welfare workers to rescue animals that

accidentally fall into underground places from which they cannot escape. This is an unimaginably awful fate. Please help us to do everything in our power to rescue these small creatures whenever a report reaches us. This dreadful fate overtakes more small animals that one might perhaps imagine.