

LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

Need to do more for strays

Compassion for stray animals is a good thing but when you just feed them and do nothing else, the picture isn't so rosy, writes

Aneeta Sundararaj

EVERY evening, a lady in the neighbourhood will leave her home, a bucket in hand. She will visit the hawker stalls and restaurants in the vicinity and collect leftover food.

She then leaves this bucket in one place and soon, stray dogs and cats come to feed.

What can be considered a good-hearted act by this lady can potentially lead to the problem of overpopulation of stray cats and dogs in that neighbourhood, says Lorna Fisher, the 50-year-old chief operating officer of SPCA Selangor. With ample food, and in turn, good health, these dogs and cats will soon produce puppies and kittens. They grow up and are also fed well. In time, they will produce more puppies and kittens.

"Who owns these puppies and kittens?" asks Lorna. "Is it the good-hearted lady who feeds them each day?" What else is done for them? Who pays for their vaccinations and medications? Who looks after them when they're old and dying? The more serious issue is what happens when there are just too many strays and no one to feed them, they become aggressive from sheer hunger?

This is why the SPCA Selangor recently became party to an MoU to work towards implementing a Stray Free Malaysia (SFM) campaign. They will work with municipal councils and caring communities to reduce and control the stray animal population in a humane, effective, sustainable and a socially-acceptable manner.

TALKING ANIMALS

Before she explains exactly what all this entails, Lorna says humans add a connotation to everything that an animal does. For example, when we're going to leave the house, we think the dog or cat knows this. Lorna insists that they don't. What they feel is the heightened tension in you. You're concerned about leaving. The dog doesn't know if you're going to be away for a week or an hour. It's just aware of what you're feeling.

That said, Lorna then tells

a story that shows that she, too, might have at one time fallen into this trap of "putting words into a horse's mouth".

"I had a horse for more than 10 years and wanted to apply what I learnt during my training as a horse trainer. When I rode him for the first time, he threw me off. I swear that horse glared at me. If he could talk, I think he would have said something like, 'Who the bloody hell do you think you are? You're trying to teach me?' While I walked away, licking my wounds, a 6-year-old hopped onto the horse and he was lovely and gentle with the child."

Born and brought up in Monmouthshire, England, Lorna describes her childhood and youth as "not being completely immersed in farming, but completely

immersed in country life." She shakes her head and adds: "My father said that every animal which needed help had my mother's address. We had everything, from dogs, cats, chickens, cows."

When she decided that she wanted a career that focused on training horses, her father went to see an insurance agent. Advised that his daughter could end up in a wheelchair by the age of 25, Lorna's father insisted she pursue a course that would allow her to earn money if she ended up in a wheelchair. That was why Lorna pursued a degree in business and, thereafter, qualified as an international horse trainer.

Fascinated by the way human and animals learn, she now specialises in managing people who manage animals. She says that her work with the SPCA Selangor combines everything she's been trained for.

NEUTERING PETS

In favour of neutering all household pets, Lorna shares some of the hilarious reasons people refuse to do so. She recalls: "Some tell me that if they neuter the dog, it'll become fat. One said his cat would become

gay. Or the dog would become depressed. Or the cat will shrink."

She smirks and adds: "Or because the cat is a pure breed, it won't be

The cat trap used as a humane way of catching stray cats.



Lorna Fisher

PICTURE BY NIK HARIFF HASSAN

interested in sex."

Putting it bluntly, she says that not neutering a pet, but never allowing it to socialise in case it has puppies and kittens is like telling your teenage child that he can read dirty magazines and get aroused, but he can't ever get married, have sex or produce children.

She adds: "A boy will know what he's missing if he's neutered. But a dog won't. With animals, sex is not for fun. It's not a social connection."

NEUTERING STRAYS

But who's going to fork out money for strays to be neutered?

Lorna says the approach is to work for a policy of Trap, Neuter, Release, Manage (TNRM). The idea is to educate, activate and garner support for safe strays on our streets. This policy will bring about measurable control of strays in a humane, effective, sustainable and socially-acceptable manner.

Going back to the example of the woman who feeds the stray animals, Lorna says a possible scenario in the future is this: The woman contacts SPCA Selangor and says she doesn't have the heart to stop feeding the strays but she doesn't have the money to get them all neutered either.

"We will help her raise funds from the community. Then, we will help her gather all the strays in the area and send them to our Klinik Kembiri to be neutered. After they recover, we'll release them back into the community."

This way, the strays that are already there will continue to be fed by the woman.

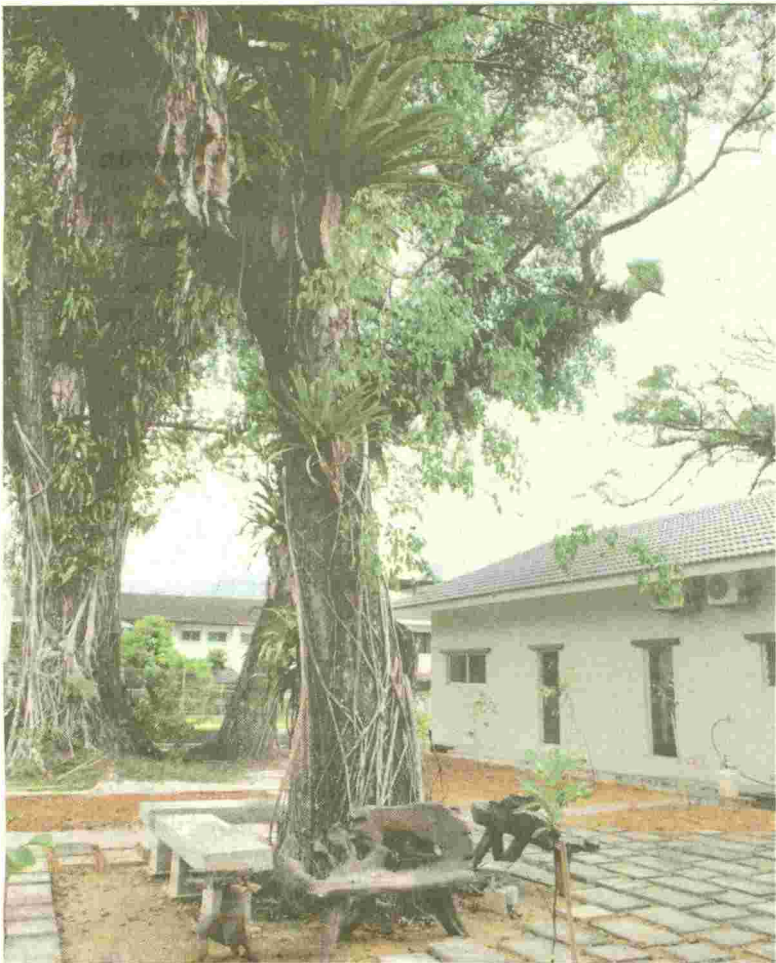
IF THE BUYING STOPS, THE ABUSE WILL STOP

SPCA Selangor wants to introduce the idea of a Stray Animal Watch where the community keeps an eye out for strays which are being abused or even for bad breeders. Take a dog like Jefferey, a poodle now in the care of SPCA Selangor.

"Look at him," Lorna says. "His feet are almost webbed, which tells us that he's lived in a cage all his life."

She suspects that an unscrupulous breeder had used Jefferey for the sole purpose of breeding puppies. These puppies would then be sold in the markets. When he was no longer of use, Jefferey was abandoned.





Courtyard of the SPCA centre.

"That's why we have to have that Animal Welfare Bill passed by Parliament," she says with conviction. The Bill has been passed by Parliament, but needs to be ratified by the Yang Di Pertuan Agong and will subsequently be gazetted.

"This kind of abuse can't go on," says Lorna, emphatically. "You know, Jefferey is about 10 years old. He's not going to live for very long and I doubt anyone is going to take him in. But I can tell you these last few months he's been with us at the SPCA are probably the happiest he's ever been in his life."

Lorna also believes that the new Act will go a long way towards preventing what she calls the "abdication of responsibility by pet owners".

Just last week, she says, a family came into the centre and brought along an 8-month-old puppy they wanted to surrender because they

were moving to another city the next day.

Narrowing her eyes, she says: "I looked at them and asked, 'You only knew this yesterday?'. They replied that they didn't want this puppy but would buy a new one when they arrived in the new city. We refused and told them to keep the puppy."

Instinct, however, warned her that they hadn't seen the last of this dog. True enough, the family got into the car, drove down the road, opened the side door and threw the puppy out.

The plan for the future, however, remains as follows: Through education, campaigns and effective legislation, hopefully, SPCA Selangor will be able to work with animal lovers, forward-thinking and dynamic Municipal Councils, residents of affected communities, animal feeders and independent rescuers to improve the lives of community animals.



Ramadan starters

CRISP and deeply seasoned, pakora is Indian fritters that can be made with almost any vegetable. To emphasise the corn flavour here, fine cornmeal joins the more traditional chickpea flour — along

with fresh corn.

A ridiculously flavourful chutney, which is sweet, hot and a little sour, accompanies the dish. A jarred version from the supermarket would definitely work too. **NYT**

SPICY CORN PAKORAS WITH MANGO-TAMARIND CHUTNEY

Preparation: 1 hour
Makes: 16-18 pieces

Ingredients

¼ cup chickpea flour
¾ cup all-purpose flour
1 cup fine cornmeal
1.5 tsp kosher salt
½ tsp baking powder
½ tsp turmeric powder
2 ½ cups fresh corn kernels (about 6 ears corn)
4 tbsp ghee, clarified butter or vegetable oil
½ tsp cumin seeds
½ tsp fennel seeds
½ tsp mustard seeds
1 tsp finely chopped fresh red or green chilli or ¼ tsp cayenne
½ cup chopped scallions
½ cup chopped cilantro, tender stems and leaves
1 tbsp grated ginger
Vegetable oil, for frying

Lime wedges
Mango-tamarind chutney

Method

1. In a mixing bowl, combine chickpea flour, all-purpose flour, cornmeal, salt, baking powder and turmeric.
2. In a food processor, grind corn kernels to a rough puree. Add puree to flour mixture and stir well to make a stiff batter.
3. Put ghee in a small pan over medium-high heat. Add cumin, fennel and mustard seeds. When seeds are lightly toasted and begin to pop, pour mixture into the batter. Add chilli, scallions, cilantro and ginger, and stir

well. (Batter may be prepared several hours in advance.)

4. Pour vegetable oil into a cast-iron skillet to a depth of 1 inch. Heat on medium-high until oil looks wavy. Using two large soup spoons, carefully slip morsels of batter into the oil, working in batches if necessary. Adjust the heat so pakora will brown gently on one side, about 2 minutes. Turn pakora and brown on other side, about 2 minutes more. Remove with a slotted spoon and blot on paper towels. Serve hot with lime wedges and mango-tamarind chutney, or another chutney if desired.

MANGO-TAMARIND CHUTNEY

Ingredients

110g seedless tamarind pulp, about ¼ cup (or substitute ½ cup prepared tamarind juice)
6 tbsp brown sugar
½ tsp kosher salt
½ cup finely diced red onion
½ tsp finely chopped fresh red or green chilli or ¼ tsp cayenne
2 tsp grated ginger
2 medium mangoes diced 1cm, about 2 cups

2 tbsp chopped mint, optional
2 tbsp chopped cilantro, optional

Method

1. To make tamarind juice, put the pulp in a bowl and cover with 1 cup boiling water. Stir well and let soak for 10 to 15 minutes. Set a fine-meshed strainer over another bowl, add soaked tamarind and press hard with a wooden spoon to extract the juice. This should yield

½ cup tamarind juice. Discard the solids left in the strainer. (If using prepared tamarind juice, skip this step.)

2. Add brown sugar and salt and stir to dissolve, then add onion, chilli, ginger and diced mango and toss gently to combine. (Chutney may be prepared several hours in advance.) Just before serving, add mint and cilantro, if using.