

ANIMAL WELFARE

Undergrads lend a hand to furry friends

Varsity animal welfare groups helping to educate peers and manage strays on campus

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SINGAPORE – They feed 30 homeless and feral cats and minimise conflicts that arise when hostel residents complain of cats lingering outside their rooms, scratching their shoes or following them to the toilet.

When issues involving cats occur on campus, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) authorities know to first turn to the student-run Cat Management Network (CMN). Such animal welfare groups are increasingly making a difference at local universities.

Set up between 2005 and 2007, the groups reach out to their peers on



A dog from an animal shelter at NTU campus group Animal Lovers' Society's Animal Day in January. PHOTO ANIMAL LOVERS' SOCIETY

issues ranging from responsible pet ownership to shark's fin consumption.

Their activities have grown over the years to include adoption drives

in school and volunteer work at animal shelters.

Some were started by undergraduates wanting an outlet to help animals;

others stemmed from parties coming together to manage animal populations on campus.

The CMN, for instance, began in 2006 after representatives from NTU's Office of Facilities Planning and Management, its Nanyang Pets Support Group and the Cat Welfare Society studied the feasibility of "cat cafes" on campus.

There are now seven of these spaces with low human traffic where responsible feeding takes place and sterilisation is a priority, said CMN President and fourth-year English student Muhammad Zahari Abu Talib, 25.

The group puts up educational posters on animal dumping — at least one case of cat dumping is reported each semester, even though pets are not allowed in the residence halls — and responsible feeding practices.

The group recently encountered a case of an abused cat whose skin had

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 SPCA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

chemical burns. But enforcement is difficult, said Mr Zahari, as there is usually insufficient evidence to pursue matters.

A fellow NTU group, the Animal Lovers' Society (ALS), is just as active, with visits to Noah's Ark animal sanctuary in Johor, for instance.

This year, it helped rescue three dogs found on campus, and one was reunited with its owner after being taken to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Another was adopted by a professor and the third is at a shelter awaiting a new home.

ALS President Sreya Banerjee, an electrical and electronic engineering student, said the group is comprised of about 35 committee members, with ordinary membership doubling to 200 in the past year. Some of the members volunteer at three shelters here.

Its Animal Day event in January featured parakeets and hamsters belonging to students and a dog from Oasis 2nd Chance Animal Shelter.

External organisations, such as the SPCA and Animal Concerns Research and Education Society, that took part to educate students also got to recruit volunteers and sell merchandise, said Ms Banerjee, 21.

The animal cause is championed by similar groups at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore Management University (SMU), while students at the Singapore Institute of Management and

the polytechnics volunteer with external organisations.

NUS' People Ending Animal Cruelty and Exploitation (PEACE) held a symposium on rescue, rehabilitation and responsibility attended by 40 students and members of the public last Saturday.

PEACE President Joys Tan said that, while its focus is on education, its cat cafe project has enabled the 10 cats on campus to be sterilised, save for one that is pregnant.

At SMU, People for Animal Welfare will hold its Animal Day next month and hopes to incorporate an adoption drive. Its President, Ms Ananya Prithvi Deshpande, said it aims to increase outreach and tackle topics like caring for ageing animals soon.

SPCA Executive Director Corinne Fong commended the campus groups for "taking on a thankless job". She said the youths bring energy and idealism, which sometimes must be tempered with realism about the money and wide network of potential adopters needed for animal rescues, for instance.

"It's really good they've seen a need to address issues on the ground," Ms Fong said. "One way for them is to get more networks, get more of their peers to participate."

"Strays will probably never cease because there are tens of thousands out there. If we work towards sterilisation or proper management, hopefully there'll be some way to manage the numbers."