

7th August 2015

Dear Buddhist Friends,

Advisory statement on the Buddhist practice of releasing captive animals

Earlier this year the British press widely reported that a group of UK Buddhists had bought crabs and lobsters from fish merchants in the Brighton area for release back into the sea.

http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/13349747.Investigation_launched_after_Buddhists_release_non_native_species_of_Canadian_lobster_and_Dungeoness_crab_into_the_sea_off_Brighton/

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3137547/Buddhists-bought-2-000-lobsters-crabs-set-free-foreign-crustaceans-eat-localealife.Html>

Unfortunately, this caused serious environmental harm: the species released were North American and likely to eat local species, unbalancing the local ecosystem.

The practice of releasing captive animals into the wild is found among a number of Buddhist traditions. It is our understanding that this is not a common practice in the west but is more common in Buddhist countries in Asia. The incident in Brighton was the first of which we are aware in the UK.

The practice is an expression of compassion, a key Buddhist value. For some, to release animals that were captive or destined to be killed is seen as a way of creating 'merit'. However, clearly, to release animals which disturb a region's ecological balance, causing the death of other animals, is not an act of compassion.

Dr Sean Ashworth, Deputy Chief Fisheries and Conservation Officer offers the following:

...one of the greatest threats to biodiversity across the globe is that posed by invasive non-native species. The huge ecological and economic impacts imposed by non-native species that become invasive are increasingly being understood. As well as impacting the natural environment it has been estimated that damage caused by invasive species worldwide amounts to almost five percent of the world economy.

These species do not belong to the ecosystems in which they are either intentionally or unintentionally placed. They tend to disrupt the ecosystem's balance. These species are often plants, fishes, molluscs, crustaceans, algae, bacteria or viruses. They can have a direct impact on the native ecology through population explosion and eventual elimination of native species, introduction of new diseases and parasites harmful to resident species, habitat alteration, changes in water quality and gene pool deterioration through hybridisation. In the UK, species including slipper limpets, Pacific oysters and Chinese mitten crabs have all impacted on our seas.

http://www.marlin.ac.uk/marine_alien/

Buddhists considering this practice should be absolutely sure that they are not releasing any non-local, non-native species. It may be very difficult to establish whether the animals are local, but the overriding concern must surely be concern for other animals and the ecosystem. Please share this information as widely as possible within your Buddhist tradition and contacts.

Kind regards,
Val Stephenson

Chair, The Network of Buddhist Organisations UK