

CONSERVATION PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH



CONSERVATION PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE

A guide for Buddhist monks in Cambodia

The development of this textbook was possible thanks to generous support of
WWF and WTG

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE?

Prayer Animal Release means any animals that are released for religious reasons. This includes

- animals that are released during a religious ceremony
- animals released by individuals as an act of faith

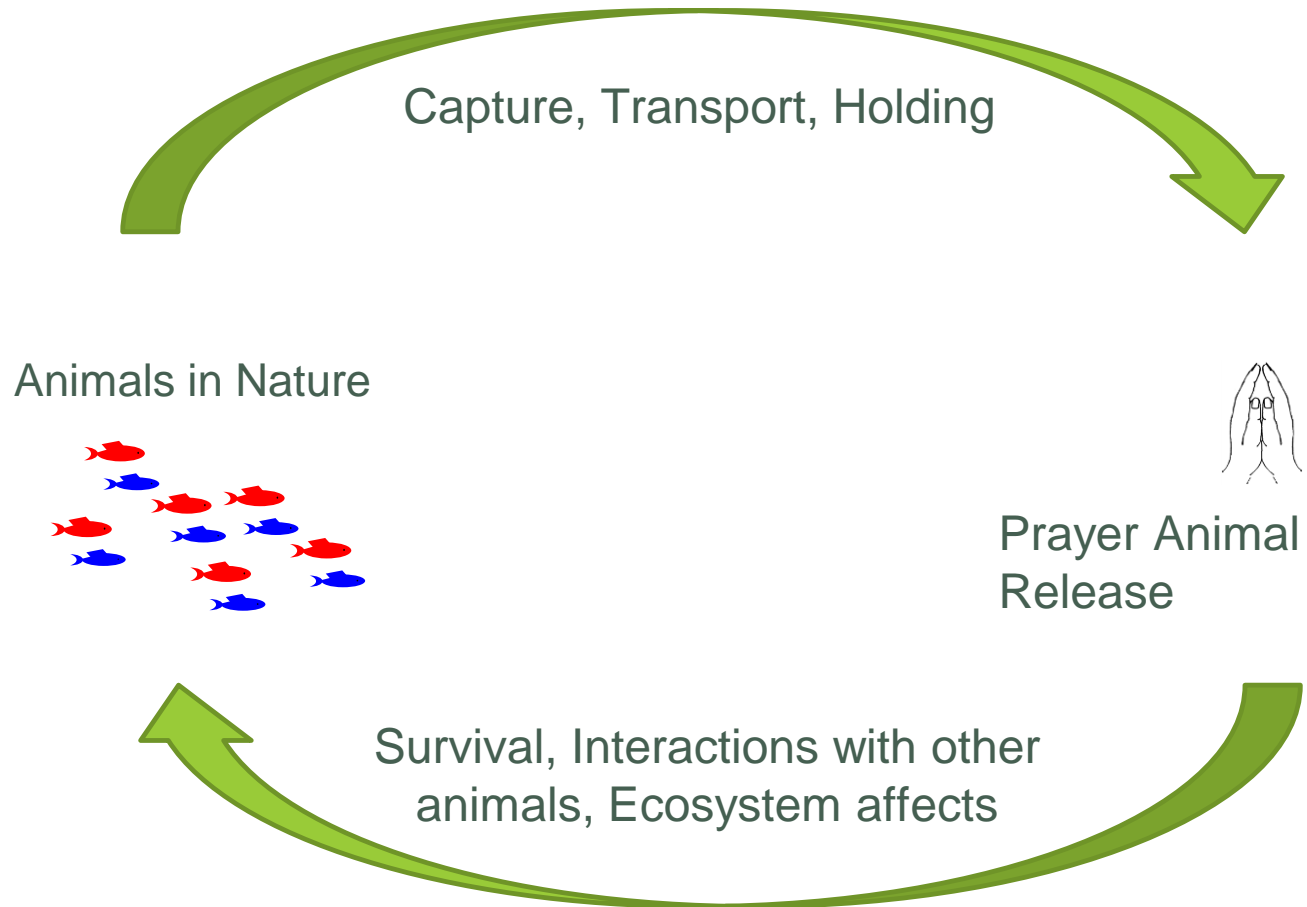
Prayer Animal Release is practiced all over the world and has many different names

- English names include: Merit Release, Religious Release, Mercy Release, Wildlife Release, Animal Liberation, Life Release, Lucky Release
- The Chinese name is 放生 (fangsheng)
- The Japanese name is 放生会 (hōjō-e)
- The Tibetan name is ཚེ་ཐར (tshe thar)
- The Burmese name is ဇီဝိတ သါန (ziwita dhana)
- In Cambodia it is called ធ្វើបុណ្យកុសលតាមរយៈការលែងសត្វ (thver bonkosal tamroyeak kalengsatt)

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE?

Prayer animal release is:

- Actions leading up to release ceremony
- Release ceremony
- Consequences of releasing animals



SECTION 1: TRADITIONAL PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE IN CAMBODIA

Community based surveys

- University of Battambang (UBB)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

Investigated

- Prevalence of Prayer Animal Release
- People's attitudes towards Prayer Animal Release
- How Prayer Animal Release can affect animals and the environment



The Survey

People of many different ages, professions and experiences were surveyed:

- 5 different provinces★
- 685 Cambodian people
- Women and Men
- The youngest was 16, the oldest was 89
- Professions included monk, student, government, farmer, teacher, tuktuk driver, lawyer, service industry, and others
- Single, married and widowed
- People with and without children/families
- Rural and urban residents



The Survey: Overview

**9 out of 10 people in Cambodia (90%)
release animals during religious worship**

Most people who release animals believe it is beneficial for

- themselves and their family
- the animals being released
- the environment



The Survey: Overview

People most often release birds and fish. Reptiles, especially turtles, are also often released.

Most people release multiple animals at the same time, most commonly between 2 and 10 animals are released together.



The Survey: Overview

Most people release animals once per year during special events.

The most common release times are

- Buddha Day (Vesak)
- Khmer New Year
- Special ceremonies at local wats
- Family anniversaries.

Some people release animals at random times, whenever it is convenient.



The Survey: Overview

Over 10 million animals are released in Cambodia every year for Prayer Animal Release

For comparison:

There are **2,700,000** motorbikes in the whole of Cambodia

There are 290 Giant Ibis (Cambodia's national bird) left in the wild

360,000 human babies were born in Cambodia in 2020

2,180,000 pigs are farmed in Cambodia

69,608 Cambodian people have been infected with COVID-19 by July 23rd 2021

And 1,168 Cambodian people have died due to COVID-19 in the same time

SECTION 2: PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE

Prayer Animal Release is a compassionate act.

- Buddhists are aware of the need to treat animals well.
- Buddhist teachings emphasize caring for animals and the environment.

Traditional Prayer Animal Release can have many unintended negative consequences, which can be harmful for

- the animals
- the environment
- the people that are releasing animals.



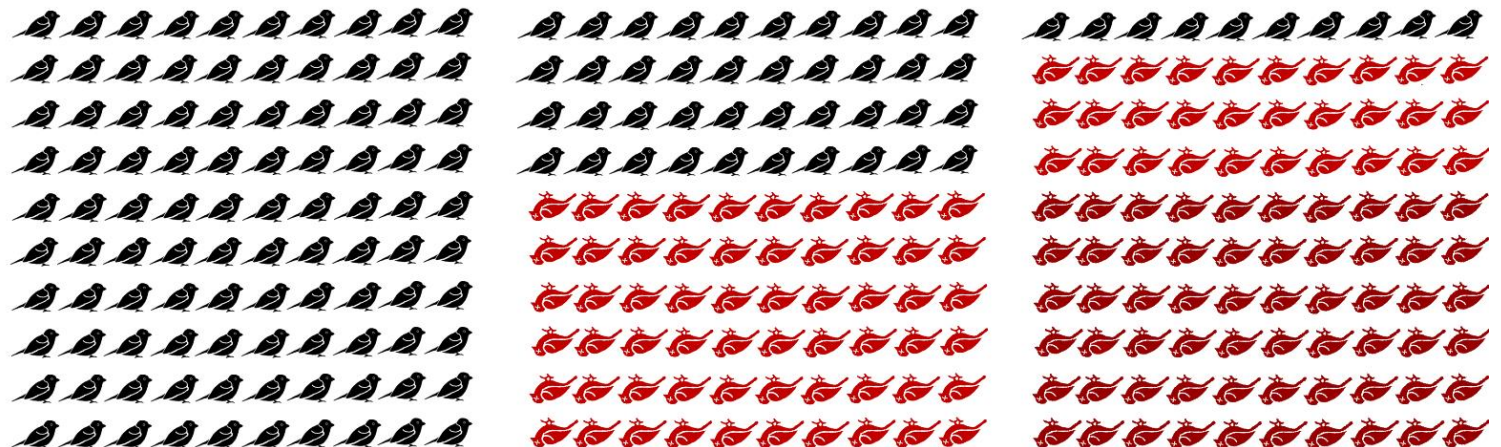
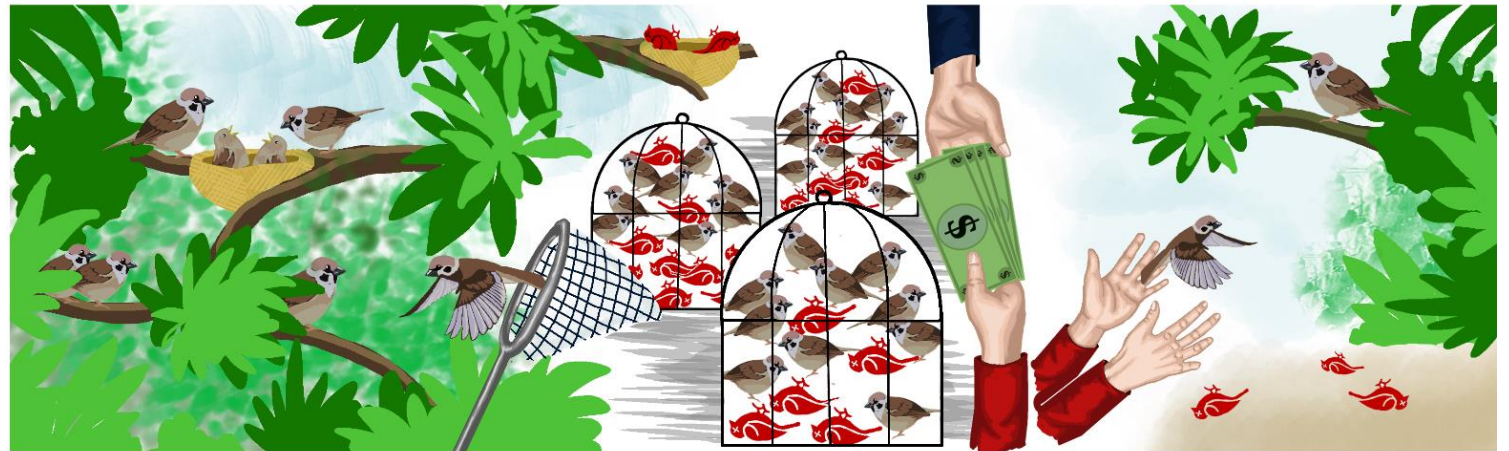
Animal Suffering and Death

Animal Welfare

Animals suffer, can be seriously injured and even die due to incorrect handling

- When they are captured
- During transport
- While in captivity
- After they are released

Even minor injuries can cause physical pain and suffering.



Animal Suffering and Death

Suffering is not just physical

Being captured, taken away from their home, forced into a cage, often in poor conditions, with many other animals waiting to be sold, and then being released into a strange area, is very frightening.

Prayer Animal Release scares animals - an animal that is scared is not happy!

Fear and shock can kill an animal



Animal Suffering and Death

Capture

Various methods are used to catch animals for Prayer Animal Release.

- Mist nets
- Snares
- Collected from the nest

Non-target animals may be trapped. For example, bats are often caught in mist nets intended for birds.



Animal Suffering and Death



Another problem with capturing animals from the wild concerns the animals left behind.

Many species

- Form strong parental partnership bonds
- And both the mother and father are necessary to raise, protect and feed their family.

Animal Suffering and Death

Transport and Captivity

The unnecessary and incorrect transport and captivity of animals causes immense animal suffering.

- Waiting in crowded cages is an ideal condition for disease and parasites transmission
- There is a high risk of injury
- Animals often are unable to eat or drink because they are too stressed and/or don't have adequate access to food and water



Animal Suffering and Death

After Release

Released animals are very vulnerable to predators and accidents.

- They may be weak and/or sick after incorrect captivity
- The sudden release into a new environment is very disorientating
- Many released animals starve to death, because they don't know where to find food..

Estimates suggest at least half of the animals released die within 10 hours. Most of the remaining animals die within a few days.



Animal Suffering and Death

After Release

The release environment can kill the animals

- Forest birds released in a city
- Marine fish released into a freshwater lake
- Tortoise released in water

Even if the environment is not lethal, animals can't feed themselves, or find shelter, so are very likely to die.



Animal Suffering and Death

After Release

Many animal species are territorial.

- Resident animals might attack the released animal
- The risk of injury and death to both the animal being released and the resident animals is high



Damage to Environments, Ecosystems and Animal Populations

Environmental Damage

Collecting animals from the wild may cause environmental damage

- By-catch of non-targeted species
- Deforestation to reach collecting site
- Use of poisons and/or explosives to catch fish

Prayer Animal Release will contribute to climate change.

- Transport vehicles produce gases that contribute to pollution and climate change
- The further a vehicle travels, the more gases are produced



Damage to Environments, Ecosystems and Animal Populations

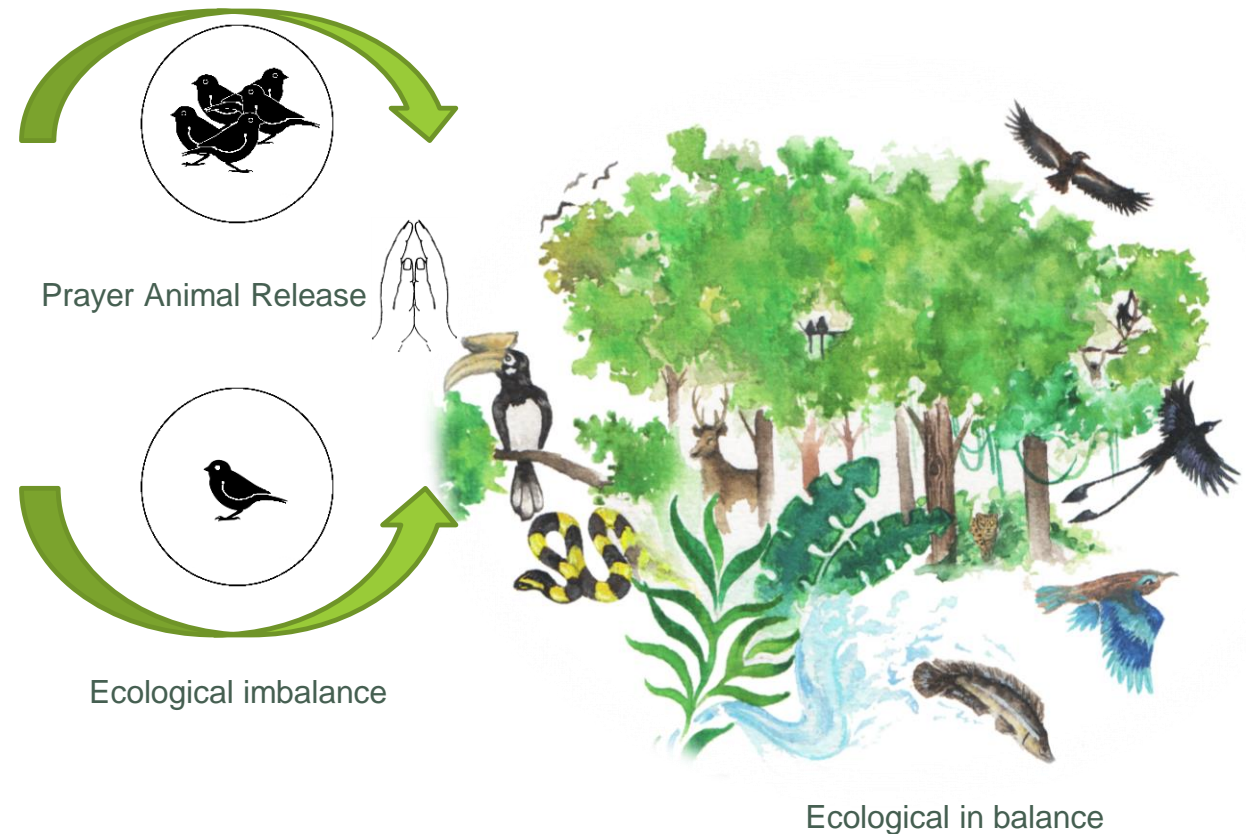
Damage to Ecosystems and Communities

Natural ecosystems, if left alone, are in balance.

- There is enough food, shelter, and other resources
- There are enough predators and prey

Prayer Animal Release disturbs the balance of nature

- Many animals released at the same time can overwhelm natural ecosystems,
- Even a single released animal can disrupt local animal communities.



Damage to Environments, Ecosystems and Animal Populations

Damage to Animal Populations

Cambodia is part of the global Extinction Crisis

- Many of Cambodia's species are threatened or endangered.
- Many of the species involved in Prayer Animal Release are at risk, locally or globally

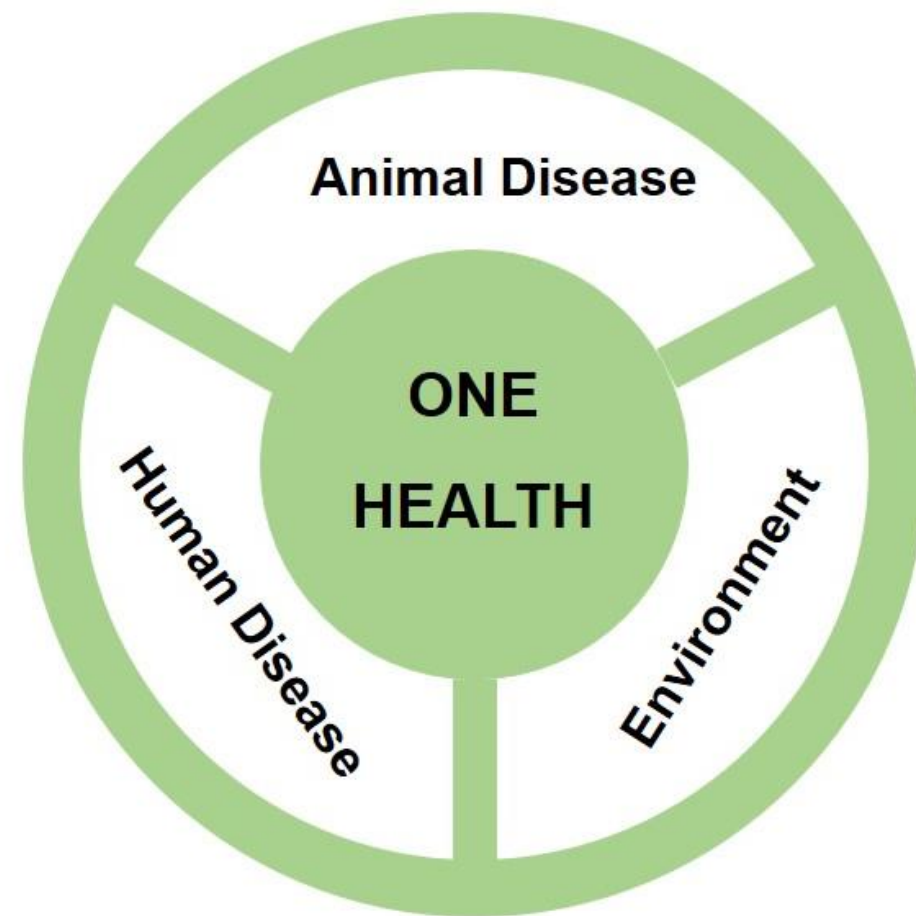


Damage to Environments, Ecosystems and Animal Populations

Damage to Animal Populations

Prayer Animal Release increases the risk of disease and parasite transmission.

- When animals are released into new locations diseases and parasites are released with them.
- These pathogens can infect resident animals in the new environment.
- Even if a release animal looks healthy, it can still infect other animals with diseases.



Invasive Species

An invasive species is one that

- is moved by humans from one location to another
- that causes environmental and/or economic damage

Cambodia already has many invasive species

- Some of these are used for Prayer Animal Release



Invasive Species – Problems caused by Invasive Species

Native species don't know how to

- Avoid a new predator
- Avoid a poisonous prey species

Invasive species are very good at surviving in disturbed habitats

- Deforestation or climate change reduced resources available for native species
- Invasive species take even more resources from native species

Invasive species may breed with native species.

- This is called hybridization.
- Sometimes the hybrid invasive species will replace the native species which will be forever lost.



Invasive Species

National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan for Cambodia (NISSAP)

- Developed and produced by the Ministry of Environment
- Recommends that no invasive species should be imported or released in Cambodia,
- Includes a “List of Prioritized Invasive Species in Cambodia to be Eradicated Immediately”



Disease Transfer

Diseases can be transferred from animals to humans.

- For example The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19
- Decreased contact with animals reduces the risk of disease transfer

More on this in Module 3



The screenshot shows the WHO COVID-19 Global literature on coronavirus disease search results page. The page features the WHO logo and the text "World Health Organization" on the left. On the right, it says "COVID-19 Global literature on coronavirus disease" with language options for "العربية" and "中文(中国)". Below this is a search bar with the text "Title, abstract, subject" and a dropdown arrow. The main content area displays the search results for the article "COVID-19 Highlights the Need for More Effective Wildlife Trade Legislation." by Borzée, Amaël; McNeely, Jeffrey; Magellan, Kit; Miller, Jennifer R B; Porter, Lindsay; Dutta, Trishna; Kadinjappalli, Krishnakumar P; Sharma, Sandeep; Shahabuddin, Ghazala; Aprilinayati, Fikty; Ryan, Gerard E; Hughes, Alice; Abd Mutalib, Aini Hasanah; Wahab, Ahmad Zafir Abdul; Bista, Damber; Chavanich, Suchana Apple; Chong, Ju Lian; Gale, George A; Ghaffari, Hanyeh; Ghimirey, Yadav; Jayaraj, Vijaya Kumaran; Khatiwada, Ambika Prasad; Khatiwada, Monsoon; Krishna, Murali; Lwin, Ngwe; Paudel, Prakash Kumar; Sadykova, Chinara; Savini, Tommaso; Shrestha, Bharat Babu; Strine, Colin T; Sutthacheep, Makamas; Wong, Ee Phin; Yeemin, Thamasak; Zahirudin, Natasha Zulaika; Zhang, Li. The article is published in *Trends Ecol Evol*; 35(12): 1052-1055, 2020 12. The article is in English, available on MEDLINE, with ID: covidwho-837270.

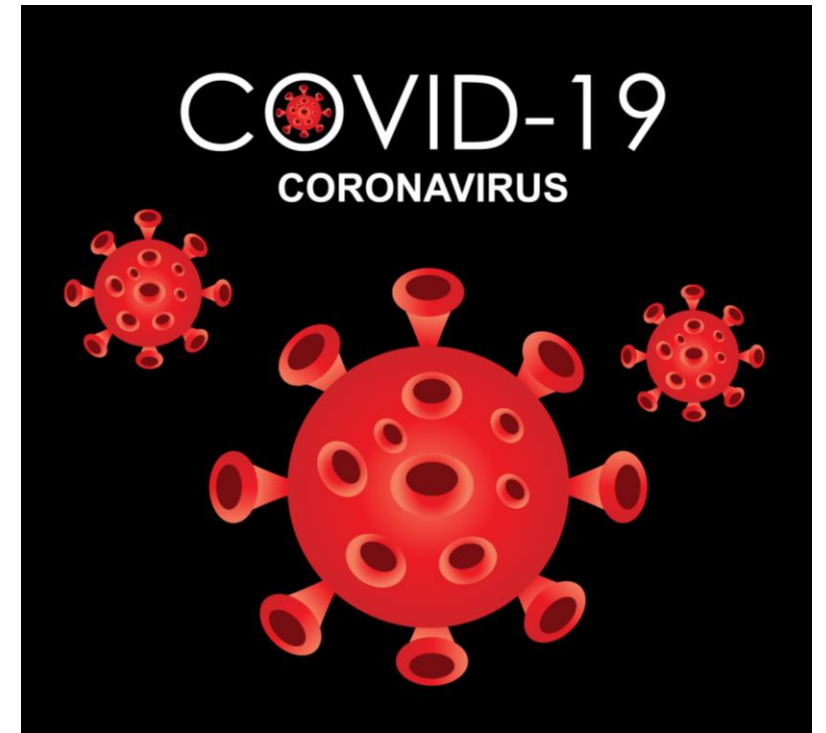
Disease Transfer

COVID-19 AND PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE

If you follow all safety guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Prayer Animal Release activities should be safe.

Some extra precautions are:

- Minimize contact with animals as much as possible.
- If you buy animals in a cage, do not remove the animals yourself, but allow them to leave on their own
- Wear gloves to handle animals
- Do not pass animals between people
- Wear a mask and maintain social distancing at all times during Prayer Animal Release ceremonies



Please follow all safety guidelines to stop the spread of COVID-19!

Illegal Wildlife Trade

Cambodia is a signatory on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

- Many species are illegal to catch, transport, sell or keep
- Many animals, especially expensive or exotic animals, may be illegally transported into Cambodia

Anyone who buys and releases exotic animals may unintentionally be supporting the criminals who illegally trade animals.



CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE (CHAPTER 10)

The Cambodian law is very clear about the fact that wildlife is protected and activities like hunting, trapping, poaching, trading and keeping wildlife as pets are illegal in the vast majority of cases.

The Cambodian Law on Forestry in 2002 (Chapter 10: Articles 48- 50), states that:

Article 48:

All kinds of wildlife species in the Kingdom of Cambodia are State property and the component of forest resources, including all species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, other invertebrates, and their eggs or offspring. Such wildlife is under the management, research and conservation of the Forestry Administration, except for fish and animals that breed in water. Wildlife specimens are dead wildlife, including the whole body, internal or external organs, the skeleton and processing products, and shall be under the management jurisdiction of the Forestry Administration. All wildlife shall be divided into the following three categories (endangered species, Rare species and Common species)

CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE (CHAPTER 10)

The Cambodian Law on Forestry in 2002 (Chapter 10: Articles 48- 50), states that:

Article 49:

It is strictly prohibited to hunt, harm or harass all kind of wildlife using all types of dangerous means, hunting during the prohibited season, and hunting in protected zones.

In the case of rare and endangered wildlife species, hunting, harassing, netting, trapping, poisoning, transporting, trading, exporting and importing, and keeping them in a zoo or family house is generally prohibited.

Article 50:

In the case of common wildlife species, it is only allowed to keep them in a zoo or family house, export and import them if a permit to do so was issued by the Forestry Administration.

PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION OF FISHERIES (CHAPTER 5)

The Cambodian Law on Fisheries in 2007 (Chapter 5: Articles 20 and 23), states that:

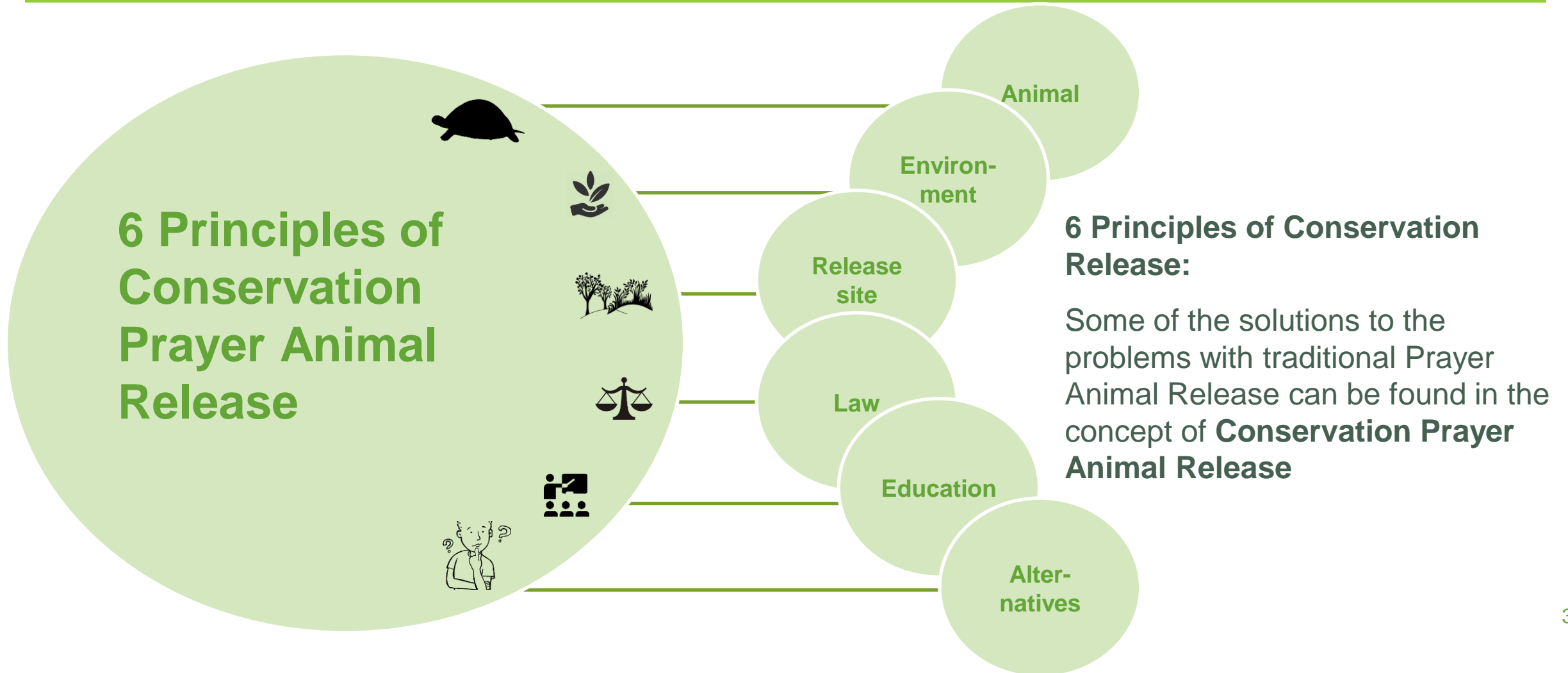
Article 20:

Prohibits the use of fishing gear including electrocuting devices, explosives, poisons, pumps that dry areas, spear-fishing, nets with mesh size less than 1.5 cm or greater than 15 cm in inland waters, dam fishing, trawling in inland waters, etc.

Article 23:

Outlines activities allowed only under permission including: catching, buying, selling, stocking and transporting fingerlings or fish eggs and other aquatic animals' offspring or eggs; and transporting, processing, buying, selling, and stocking endangered fisheries resources.

SECTION 3: A CONSERVATION APPROACH TO PRAYER ANIMAL RELEASE



Conservation Release: Principle 1



CONSIDER THE ANIMALS

Before releasing any animals we should check:

- Is the animal endangered?
- Is the species native to Cambodia?
- Is the animals adult or juvenile?
- Is the animal healthy and not injured?
- Is the animal afraid of humans?
- Can we reduce the number of animals released?
 - Is it necessary to release many animals at the same time? For example, can we release 2 animals instead of 10?

Conservation Release: Principle 2



CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT

We must also consider the source environment and the general environmental impacts of Prayer Animal Release

- Was the animal captured using a suitable technique?
- Were any non-target animals or plants injured, killed or deprived of habitat by capturing this animal?
- How far was the animal transported between capture and release?

Conservation Release: Principle 3



SELECT AN APPROPRIATE RELEASE SITE

An appropriate release site is important to protect the animal being released, the people doing the releasing and the release site itself

- Suitable and safe release location
- Time of the day and weather conditions
- Time of year/season
- Is the release site safe for the people doing the release?

There is not one suitable location for releasing all species of animals: the release location must meet the needs of the individual species to be released.

Conservation Release: Principle 4



AVOID RELEASING EXOTIC OR INVASIVE SPECIES AND OBSERVE CAMBODIAN LAWS

There are several things to check

- Is the animal an exotic species?
- Is the animal an invasive species?
- Have all Cambodian laws been followed?

Conservation Release: Principle 5



PROVIDE EDUCATION IN CONSERVATION RELEASE PRINCIPLES

As well as our responsibility to the animals, we have a responsibility to help people understand how to protect Cambodia's wildlife and environment. There are several groups of people that we can help:

- Collectors (trappers and hunters)
- Vendors
- Prayer Animal Release participants

Conservation Release: Principle 6



CONSIDER AN ALTERNATIVE TO RELEASING ANIMALS

Prayer Animal Release is a multi-million dollar global business.

- Many of the businesses involved are not Buddhist they are just taking your money.
- There are many ways that this money can be better spent to support Cambodia.

Global awareness of the problems associated with Prayer Animal Release is increasing.

A Buddhist monk in Beijing, China, prepares to release turtles into the sea. Conservationists say that too often "mercy releases" end up harming animals.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EYEPRESS, AP

WILDLIFE WATCH

A Buddhist Tradition to Save Animals Has Taken an Ugly Turn

What began as a quest to protect wildlife is now killing animals and harming ecosystems.

BY JANI HALL



PUBLISHED JANUARY 24, 2017 • 6 MIN READ

Conservation Release: Principle 6



CONSIDER AN ALTERNATIVE TO RELEASING ANIMALS

- Buddhists who break the law by releasing illegal animals have been prosecuted.
- Buddhist communities around the world are advocating alternatives to releasing animals.
- These alternatives give real benefits for the environment, for animals, and for Buddhist practitioners.

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Conservation Prayer Animal Release

Provide Education in Conservation Release Principles.

- Talking to animal collectors, vendors, releasers, and non-practitioners
- Provide vendors with animal holding facilities that improve animal welfare.



Cambodian Buddhists can be involved with improving the welfare of released animals and educating people in Cambodia, across South East Asia, and all over the world

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Conservation Prayer Animal Release

- Donation of time and money by Buddhists is a compassionate and devout act.
- It will help the animals that are being released, the environment, and the people involved in Prayer Animal Release.
- There are many conservation organizations in Cambodia who would welcome donations of time and money to help them with their vital work.
- Buddhist communities and conservation organizations can learn from each other



Cambodian Buddhists can invest time and/or money in conservation

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Cambodia's Wildlife

Some Buddhists are starting or getting involved in conservation projects themselves.

- Many of Cambodia's wild species are threatened or endangered, and could be saved with captive breeding programs.
- Climate change, habitat destruction, uncontrolled pollution and invasive species are having a devastating toll on wild animals.
- Conservation can be aided by donating time or money to conservation organizations, or by advocating to protect wildlife.



Cambodian Buddhists can donate time or money to help conservation projects and protect Cambodia's wildlife

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Cambodia's Environment

Buddhists are advocating planting trees and cleaning up plastic pollution as an alternative to releasing animals. Similar action in Cambodia.

- Would help protect the environment
- Provide habitat for wildlife
- Help reduce the effects of climate change
- Reduce health hazards for humans and animals
- Make the environment more beautiful



Cambodian Buddhists can initiate or participate in conservation campaigns to plant trees, reduce plastic pollution, and other actions, that protect the environment

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Cambodia's future: help the children

- Buddhists in many countries are advocating donating to children's charities instead of releasing animals.
- Children are our future.



Cambodian Buddhists can partner with children's organizations to invest in Cambodia's future

Conservation Release Alternatives to Releasing Animals

Invest in Cambodia's domestic animals

- In Cambodia many thousands of unwanted dogs, cats, and other animals are donated to wats.
- These street animals are very susceptible to disease, that can be prevented by vaccination.
- Providing care to animals costs a lot of money.



Cambodian Buddhists can donate money, food, and veterinary care to help Cambodia's animals and stop the spread of disease

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Do Cambodian Buddhists want to follow, or lead the way?

Awareness of the negative impacts of traditional Prayer Animal Release is growing around the world. Buddhists have been prosecuted for illegal and environmentally damaging release activities, and this will increase. For example, the European Union is currently considering adding Prayer Animal Release to their invasive species legislation.

If Cambodian Buddhists want to follow, they can wait until global legislation starts to affect them. But Cambodia can be a world leader for Conservation Release, and Cambodian Buddhists can be Ambassadors for true compassion for animals.

How can we achieve this?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Can traditional Prayer Animal Release still be considered to be compassionate if it kills more animals than it helps and causes so much environmental damage?

Many hundreds of years ago, when the tradition of Prayer Animal Release began, there were not many humans on the earth. There were no planes or cars and people did not travel very far from home. There were many more animals and plenty of habitat for animals to survive.

Now, there are billions of people. We travel long distances in cars, planes and boats. We move animals around the world. We have polluted the earth so badly we now face a Climate Crisis. We have destroyed so much habitat and killed so many animals we now face an Extinction Crisis. The world has changed.

Is it time for Prayer Animal Release to change and adapt to the modern world, so that it helps to protect our planet with compassion rather than contributing to damaging the planet?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Are there alternative interpretations for Buddhist text and teachings?

Do Buddhist teachings specify that animals must be captured from the wild and moved to an unsuitable environment where they are likely to die? Can other activities, such as donating time or money to a conservation project, be compatible with Buddhist teaching?

What other alternatives are there for traditional Prayer Animal Release that will help protect wildlife and the environment but maintain Buddhist principles?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Are humans animals?

If humans are animals, then changing Prayer Animal Release activities to protect wildlife will protect humans too. If this is true, then can helping people also be Prayer Animal Release? For example, helping a sick child to recover and be released from hospital is certainly compassionate. Is this also animal release?

Alternatively, are people different from animals? Are we better or worse than animals? If we are better, then we have a responsibility to help animals. Or are we just a predator that doesn't even eat the animals that we kill? If this is true, are we worse than animals?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Do animals have feelings?

If animals have feelings should we consider their feelings when they are involved in Prayer Animal Release? Do animals want to be captured and taken somewhere else to be released many days later? How does that make them feel?

And are animal feelings the same as human feelings? When a human feels happy, this is a good feeling, but when a human feels sad or scared, this is a bad feeling. Is it the same for animals? And what about other animals such as birds and fish? Do they have feelings? Are their feelings the same as humans or dogs or cats? How can we recognize how a bird feels?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

How can we persuade other people?

We know that we need to conserve our planet. But not everyone agrees. Businesses exploit natural resources for their own gain. Governments avoid making conservation policies. People don't care about wildlife and the environment.

Conservation Release Principles help Buddhist Prayer Animal Release practitioners observe their religious devotion in a way that helps wildlife. How can we persuade all Buddhists to follow Conservation Release Principles. But more than this, how can Cambodian Buddhist persuade other people that they need to consider conservation, not just for Prayer Animal Release, but to help our wildlife, environments and the whole earth?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

Buddhist Code of Conduct with Wildlife

“All living things fear being beaten with clubs.

All living things fear being put to death.

Putting oneself in the place of the other,

Let no one kill nor cause another to kill”.

Dhammapada verse no. 129

APPENDIX: LITERATURE REFERENCES

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Page 23	ACCB/ Chim Sopheap			Page 42	OSMOSE
				Page 44	Paw Patrol

WWF works in over 100 countries to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature. As the well-being of people, wildlife and the environment are closely interlinked, we take an integrated approach to our work. WWF strives to safeguard the natural world, helping people live more sustainably and take action against climate change.



WWF's Beliefs & Values Programme, which has sponsored this guidebook, engages with leaders and communities based on their spiritual, religious and cultural beliefs and value systems.

The Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB) founded and operated by Allwetterzoo Munster, ACCB is one of Cambodia's first wildlife conservation centres, located at the foot of Phnom Kbal Spean, around 50 km north of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor.



Each year, several hundred wild animals are rehabilitated and, if possible, returned to the wild. Furthermore, ACCB runs environmental education activities in order to raise awareness about the threats affecting Cambodia's unique and endangered wildlife. This guide book for Buddhist monks has been developed in order to support the capacity building for Buddhist monks involved in animal protection and conservation.