

Sea lions' deaths spark concerns about level of care

JOY FANG
joyfangz@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – Two sea lions from the Singapore Zoo have died in the span of three months, most likely from an infection, while three of the five remaining sea lions have developed skin conditions. This has sparked concern among the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), while the authorities have requested for more information on the deaths.

TODAY was alerted by a reader, who sent some pictures of the animals' holdings areas, one of which showed four sea lions cramped into a small pool. One appeared to have a reddened wound on its belly.

These incidents are "disappointing" and suggest that "the level of care seems to be declining", said ACRES executive director Louis Ng, adding that ACRES was open to working with the zoo on making improvements.

When approached by TODAY, the Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), which runs the zoo as well as other wildlife parks here, clarified that the photos are outdated and the area has since undergone some renovations.

“Whether the photos were old or new, the fact is that the sea lions were housed in those conditions, which are obviously sub-optimal. (The zoo should) improve the conditions of the back of house so they are equivalent to the conditions in the public enclosures

Mr Louis Ng
ACRES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



The sea lion enclosure has undergone improvements over the years. PHOTO: ERNEST CHUA

However, they confirmed that a sea lion died in May from a severe infection that was confirmed as necropsy.

Another died this month, with veterinarians there suspecting that it also died from an infection, and are awaiting further laboratory test results for a definitive diagnosis.

"The animal's housing facilities and water qualities meet standard parameters and are not thought to be related to the cause of death. As a preventive measure, our team is closely monitoring the other sea lions in our collection," a WRS spokesperson said.

WRS Chief Life Sciences Officer Dr Cheng Wen-Haur said there have been "gradual and consistent improvements

in the sea lions' housing facilities" over the years. These include building two large pools for sea lions, resurfacing the flooring, improving ventilation facilities, and ensuring sea lions have access to salt pools at all times.

On the three sea lions which are being treated for skin conditions, Dr Cheng said these conditions are caused by a combination of multiple factors.

"Our veterinarians advise that modifying the water quality could help improve the skin conditions. As part of our ongoing process to improve the healthcare of our animals, we are in the process of upgrading the filtration system to manage the issue."

When contacted, a spokesman for

the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority) said it is aware of the deaths of the two sea lions. "We have requested WRS to provide more information on the sea lions' deaths," the spokesman said.

When asked whether living conditions for the animals could have been lacking, Dr Cheng said their exhibit space — where the sea lions spend the bulk of their time when not engaged in the animal presentations — exceed the minimum requirement for sea lions, based on international husbandry standards for the species. The same goes for the back-of-house holding areas and pools.

Wildlife and zoo experts TODAY spoke to were hesitant to pinpoint reasons for the deaths. "Unfortunately, as in the wild, disease can occur and spread from one individual to the next," said one, who declined to be named.

Ms Liz Romer, executive officer with the Australasian Society of Zoo Keeping, said they were unable to comment on the sea lions but their experience with the Singapore Zoo is that "they are highly professional and very highly regarded in the zoological industry".

But Mr Ng noted that two sea lions have died and three are sick. "Whether the photos were old or new, the fact is that the sea lions were housed in those conditions, which are obviously sub-optimal. (The zoo should) improve the conditions of the back of house so they are equivalent to the conditions in the public enclosures," he said, adding that ACRES is grateful the zoo has taken steps to boost water quality.

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