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Stephen M. Amoyemi
Advanced Breed Comprehensive College

Andrew G. Gosler
Oxford University

Iris Ho
Humane Society International

Jame Schaefer
Marquette University, jame.schaefer@marquette.edu

Kwek Yan Chong
National University of Singapore

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications/Department of Theology

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Mobilizing Religion and Conservation in Asia

Stephen M. Awoyemi

Department of Science, Advanced Breed Comprehensive College, Sagamu, Ogun, Nigeria

Andrew G. Gosler

Department of Zoology, Oxford University, Oxford, UK.

Iris Ho

Wildlife Department, Humane Society International, Washington DC

Jame Schaefer

Department of Theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Kwek Yan Chong

Department of Biological Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore

In their Letter “Limits to religious conservation efforts” (9 November, p. [740](#)), B. Gong *et al.* caution conservation practitioners that there are limits to the effect that Buddhist influence alone can have in reducing environmental degradation caused by economic development. They cite prayer animal release—a practice in which animals are trapped, sold, and then released into the wild as a form of prayer—as evidence of Buddhists' lack of understanding of ecology.

Religious leaders, government, and the local and international conservation community are currently addressing the unsustainable Buddhist practice of releasing animals. A recent policy paper by the Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative (RCRC), a committee of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology, in July 2012, stated that Buddhists are acting in good faith and should be provided with alternatives that could achieve the compassionate spirit of prayer animal release in an ecologically responsible way.¹

As an offshoot of RCRC policy, an e-mail forum involving more than 40 scientists and scholars from around the world (the Mercy Release Discourse, 13 to 17th August 2012) identified a few ideas: (i) Encourage Buddhist practitioners to adopt a domestic animal (e.g., a cow) destined for the slaughter and care for it until it dies naturally or to sponsor accredited farm animal sanctuaries. (ii) Encourage Buddhist practitioners to support conservation programs of endangered species. (iii) Facilitate support for Buddhist practitioners who want to rehabilitate animals that are sick or injured, reintroduce wildlife into the wild, or send wildlife to rescue centers.

Some Buddhist groups in China and elsewhere in the region have already put these alternatives into action.² In Singapore, religious adherents have been attempting to address the concerns as well.³ Although imperfect, these developments suggest the potential for conservation inspired by religion and for science to involve religion in collaboration and dialogue, rather than simply criticism.

References

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- ²Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan, Humane Society International, American Buddhist Confederation, Taiwan's Department of Agriculture, “*International Symposium on Buddhist Animal Release and Protecting Life, September 25–26, Taipei, Taiwan*” (2012) [in Chinese];www.forest.gov.tw/public/Attachment/29281045671.pdf.
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