

Public education and conservation research: the two additional missions that a rescue center should do

Kurtis Jai-Chyi Pei

Professor, Institute of Wildlife Conservation, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Pingtung, Taiwan

Ext. 5127 kejpei@mail.npust.edu.tw



Introduction

On 23 June 1989, the Wildlife Conservation Law was issued by the Taiwan Government. As soon as the law took effect, law enforcement agents tracked down and seized many endangered wild animals, whether trapped locally or smuggled in from overseas. Since most government agents responsible for investigation and law enforcement were not equipped with the facilities or the ability to offer medical care to these animals, confiscated wildlife often received very little care while waiting for court decisions. There was a need for rescue centers to supply these wild animals with medical treatment, shelter for rehabilitation, and a place to stay before relocation.

To meet these needs, the Council of Agriculture started planning a rescue system for protected animals and establishing standard procedures for treating injured wildlife in 1990. In January 2005, this work was transferred to the Forestry Bureau within the Council of Agriculture. The annual budget for this rescue system grew from US\$ 150,000 at the beginning to about US\$ 1,850,000. Since its establishment, this rescue system has become important for maintaining Taiwan's natural ecology and biodiversity, and for reducing illegal pet trade and environmental effects of imported species.

The Pingtung Rescue Center

The Pingtung Rescue Center was established in 1993. Main goals are

- (1) Provide animals with proper shelter and medical care.
- (2) Establish communication with related local and foreign institutions to ensure each animal in the shelter receives the best care and to collaborate in conservation of protected animals.
- (3) Establish a training platform that cultivates specialists in wildlife science, including medical care and captive management, to achieve comprehensive wildlife conservation.
- (4) Establish an public educational platform to discourage the keeping of protected animals as pets and eliminate the illegal wildlife trade.

After more than 15-year of operation, the Pingtung Rescue Center is now a full functioning animal shelter. It includes an administration building, a food preparation room, a clinic, an indoor quarantine house, and 20 indoor and outdoor enclosures (over 100 units with different sizes and designs) dedicated to housing animals. The 35 regular staffs includes 4 people for administration, 4 for research and educational activities, 3 veterinaries and 2 assistants for medical treatments, and 22 animal keepers.

Majority of these animals were brought to the Center by city and county governments, police stations, Forest District Offices, Forest and Conservation Police Units, the customs, and Cost Guard Units. Some are domestic species. Some are foreign species. Some of the foreign animals had lived in Taiwan for quite some time before settling in the Center. Some were confiscated while being transported on the ocean.

The continue influx of animals into the Center, although rarely larger mammalian species anymore, however, indicated that smuggling, illegal trade, and improper breeding of wildlife in Taiwan cannot be stopped just by passive rescuing and sheltering animals.

This kind of rescuing and sheltering apparently can only make partial contribution towards conservation of endangered animals. To improve, the Pingtung Rescue Center began programs on public education and conservation research in 1998.

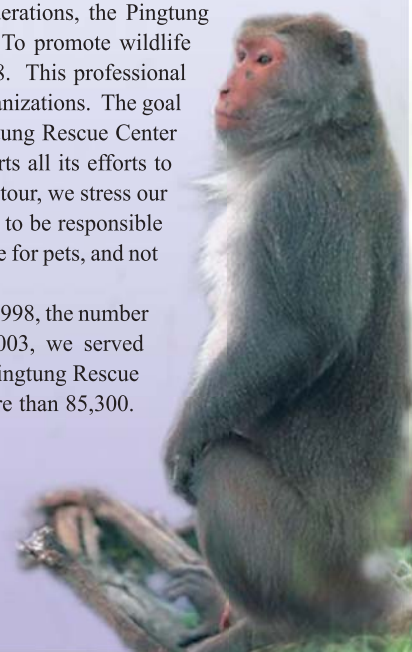
Public Education

1. Promoting Conservation via Guided Tours

Because it is short of resources and because of hygiene considerations, the Pingtung Rescue Center can not open to the public as though it were a zoo. To promote wildlife conservation in Taiwan, however, we began a touring service in 1998. This professional interpretation was available by appointment to students and social organizations. The goal of our touring service is to help the public understand why the Pingtung Rescue Center exists, why these animals need care, and why our rescue center exerts all its efforts to provide ideal living environments to sheltered animals. During each tour, we stress our philosophy of respecting and protecting life. We encourage visitors to be responsible pet owners, asking them not to buy illegal wildlife, not to buy wildlife for pets, and not to abandon their pets.

Since we opened the Pingtung Rescue Center to the public in 1998, the number of visitors has gradually increased each year. Beginning in 2003, we served 8,000-10,000 tourists each year—the maximum capacity for the Pingtung Rescue Center. By 2011, the accumulated number of visitors totaled more than 85,300.

Most were primary school and college students.



2. Encouraging Conservation via Media

In addition to opening to the public for tours, the Pingtung Rescue Center also decided to collaborate with the media to publicize the importance of conservation. We welcome interviews from media worldwide.

Many TV special reports on the Pingtung Rescue Center have repeatedly aired globally on Animal Planet and National Geographic channels. These TV reports are important for helping the world recognize the effort and contribution Taiwan is making to wildlife rescue.

In this highly developed internet era, the Pingtung Rescue Center has its own official website (<http://ptrc.npust.edu.tw>) that instantly provides updated information. It increases access for general public to the Center. It is also convenient for communication between the Center and conservation communities worldwide.

3. Providing Scientific Knowledge to Public

Since the end of 1999, the Pingtung Rescue Center has hosted over 123 public speeches concerning conservation biology. The purpose of this speech series is to introduce to the general public the knowledge, recent discoveries, and development of conservation.

In 2005, the Pingtung Rescue Center assumed publication of Notes and Newsletters of Wildlifers (NOW). This quarterly journal was originally founded by Institute of Wildlife Conservation, National Pingtung University in 1993.

4. Supporting Humanity via Life Experience Camps

Beginning in 2000, the Pingtung Rescue Center has conducted 1- to 5-day life experience camps during weekend and summer time every year. Most are designed for teenagers or families. In our camps, we try to instill the philosophy that all life is priceless and equal and that all life deserves good care. All the animals at the Pingtung Rescue Center, animals we never gave up on, are the best demonstration of our philosophy to these campers.

5. Creating a center of attraction

In the end of 2007, we finished basic construction for a life education center. This construction was jointly funded by the Taiwan's Forestry Bureau and the National Pingtung University. Development of this center was a large step in the Pingtung Rescue Center's efforts to provide educational services and create an attraction for visitors. To complete the life education center, in February 2008, we obtained additional funds of US\$ 450,000 from Ms. Shalin Liu, the President of the Summer Star Foundation for Nature, Art and Humanity (Boston, USA). Officially opened on 17 April 2009, and the life education center was named the Shalin Center for Life Education to honor Ms. Liu's support for and sponsorship of conservation of wildlife and ecosystem. It has offices for researchers and volunteers, a lobby providing information on wildlife conservation and life education, a small circular theatre for speeches, story telling and children's performances, a dedicated space for children to meet with small animals, and a lounge area for guests. In this center, we hope visitors can appreciate the intrinsic value of different life. The goal is to greatly reduce the illegal wildlife trade and its subsequent impact to the world's biodiversity.

Conservation Research

In addition to conducting regular data collection and health monitoring needed for management, the Pingtung Rescue Center also provides on request research materials and facilities to institutes worldwide. Applications for these materials and to use the facilities must meet these requirements: the animal shall not be harmed and the study must make direct contribution to the conservation of that species.

With its current foundation, the Pingtung Rescue Center was supported by the Forestry Bureau, began in 2008, to initiate the first research project to understand diseases, parasites or pathogens which may affect the wild mammals in Taiwan. Life trapping small mammals and interview of indigenous' elders, hunters and senior forest rangers on larger mammals' experiences are carrying out continuously at present.

Prospects

Nearly 20 years ago, the Pingtung Rescue Center started out with only a dog cage and a part-time assistant in a laboratory. From temporarily looking after animals confiscated by the government, the Pingtung Rescue Center gradually developed into a better functioning institute that cares greatly for wildlife welfare by actively collaborating with relevant organizations world-wide, cultivating talent, as well as providing public education, conducting research, and promoting wildlife conservation. Although the illegal wildlife trade still exists in Taiwan, our experience so far gives us the ability and the confidence to increasingly target this problem.

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