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## Zoo animals born to be wild

**As part of conservation efforts, animals born and bred in the zoo are released into native habitats to boost falling numbers**

OTTERS and mousedeer born and bred in the zoo have been released into their native habitats, as part of conservation efforts to boost their dwindling numbers in the wild.



**Oriental small-clawed otters like those were trained to fend for themselves in the wild. --JAMES CROUCHER**

Other species that land up in the zoo's care have also been given a new chance at freedom in forests here, after getting a clean bill of health.

Singapore Zoological Gardens assistant director Subash Chandran said that over the last two years, it has taken in 38 civet cats, 14 pangolins and seven slow lorises.

These were abandoned by people who kept them illegally as pets, confiscated by the authorities, or caught after making a nuisance of themselves in homes.

'We gave them full examinations, dewormed them and made sure they were parasite free before release,' he said.

Tiny microchips - like identity cards - were also embedded under their skin, so that they will be recognised if caught again.

The eight greater mousedeer and five Oriental small-clawed otters, however, were born in captivity, and had to be trained to fend for themselves in the wild.

The otters, for example, were first penned up in Sungei Buloh for about two months before they were released there in 2000.

They were gradually weaned off their diet of processed fish and meat, and allowed to hunt for live fish and crustaceans instead.

'Otters are opportunistic feeders. They surprised us by quickly devouring all the mangrove snails in their pond,' said Mr Chandran.

Upon release, all trace of the otters vanished quickly.

'But we're not worried, we suspect they swam across the Johor Straits, where the food source is very rich.

'Hopefully, they will breed with otters there and some will come back,' he said.

As for the mousedeer, which were released into nature reserves in a pilot programme in 1999, it is too early to tell if the scheme has been a success, said the National Parks Board (NParks).

Said an NParks spokesman: 'Animal re-introduction requires careful investigation and study and should not be rushed.'

So, there will be no immediate plans to breed other animals for release, she said.

Ideally, added Mr Chandran, the animals could be fitted with tracking devices, so that researchers can keep a close watch on them and establish their feeding and travelling patterns.

Other native animals here are so versatile that they have managed to adapt and survive despite encroachment by the urban jungle, without human help.

The Malayan flying lemur is one of them.

Said Mr N. Sivasothi, a research officer at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research: 'It's not very fussy about leaves, it just needs a few tree holes to hide in and can live in secondary forests. So, it's quite common here.'

Even the casualties of urbanisation - road kills of wild animals - have a part to play in conservation.

Mr Sivasothi, who is part of a group jokingly called the 'Body Snatchers', picks up such dead carcasses.

'Each body is an important record of what species still exist here, as we sometimes get creatures which we thought had already died out,' he said.

The DNA of these animals can also be useful in conservation programmes.

If a Singapore species has already died out, he explained, its DNA can be compared to the same species elsewhere, so that the most genetically-similar animal can be considered for re-introduction.