



The Commissioner for Animal Welfare

REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS
on the Animals at San Anton Gardens, Attard

On the August 2019, my office received a report from Mrs. Christine Ironfield-Smith regarding the bad state in which the animals at San Anton Gardens are being kept¹.

San Anton Gardens are heavily advertised on touristic web-sites and are state owned. Moreover, they do form part of the San Anton Presidential Palace grounds, with very strong connotations that they could even be subject to administration by the President's staff. I therefore immediately notified both the Director for Veterinary Regulation and the Director for Animal Welfare Promotion and Services, and simultaneously organised an inspection of the site by two experienced officers of my team with instructions to report primarily on the welfare of all the animals kept in the gardens and in general regarding the state of the areas in which the animals (and birds) are being kept.

On the 27th August 2019 my inspectors presented their report which is being reproduced 'in toto' herein and which forms an integral part of this report.

Report on an inspection at San Anton Gardens, Attard.

An unannounced inspection was carried out today the 27th August 2019 at San Anton Gardens, by Reuben Montebello and Ian Vella, both from the Office of the Commissioner for Animal Welfare. This inspection was triggered after receipt of a letter from Mrs Christine Ironfield-Smith, dated 03rd August 2019, expressing her concern on various issues related to the welfare of animals held at San Anton Gardens l/o Attard.

The alleged statements mentioned in the letter were indicated to the lower gardens of San Anton, and not related to the Kitchen Garden which is situated on the other side across the road. In fact, the allegations were related to the lack of proper care for the swans and ducks ponds, the birds in the aviaries, the peacocks that roam freely in the gardens, the cats living in the garden, and the turtles in one of the ponds.

From initial investigations carried out while we were observing the indicated areas in the gardens, from an initial visual assessment of all the animals in the gardens, none of them seem to have suffered, or is actually suffering from deprivation of food and water. The body conformity of all animals was satisfactory at the time of inspection, and none

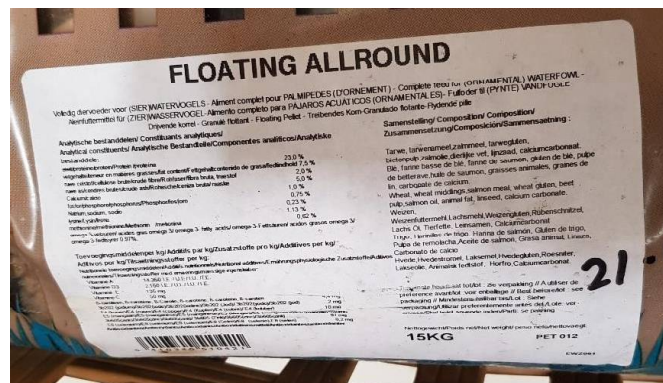
¹ Attached as Document 1

of them seem to show low body condition score or acted suspiciously in a way that they are desperately searching for food.

Findings on inspection

We have been informed that the animals situated at the San Anton gardens are under the responsibility of the ELC Consortium. When we enquired to speak with the supervisor on site, he told us that the swans and ducks in the respective ponds are fed daily by the watchman on duty. We were also shown the bag of feed that these water fowls are fed, and it seems that they are in fact given the appropriate type of feed which is dedicated to such species.

The only information that we asked and were not given an answer was when we asked what is the amount of feed given to these ducks. The supervisor on site informed us that since the watchman on duty takes care of feeding these ducks, which is normally done some time after 15:00 in the afternoon, he cannot answer our question.



A number of cats were observed to be roaming on site around the garden, but in particular in the area of the Restrooms. None of the cats we saw did show any signs of hunger. They were noted to be quite relaxed and sleeping in the sun. When asked about the water source from where they can drink in this temperature and weather conditions, we were shown an integrated drinking bowl within a granite water feature with automated flowing water. We were also informed that all the cats are being taken care

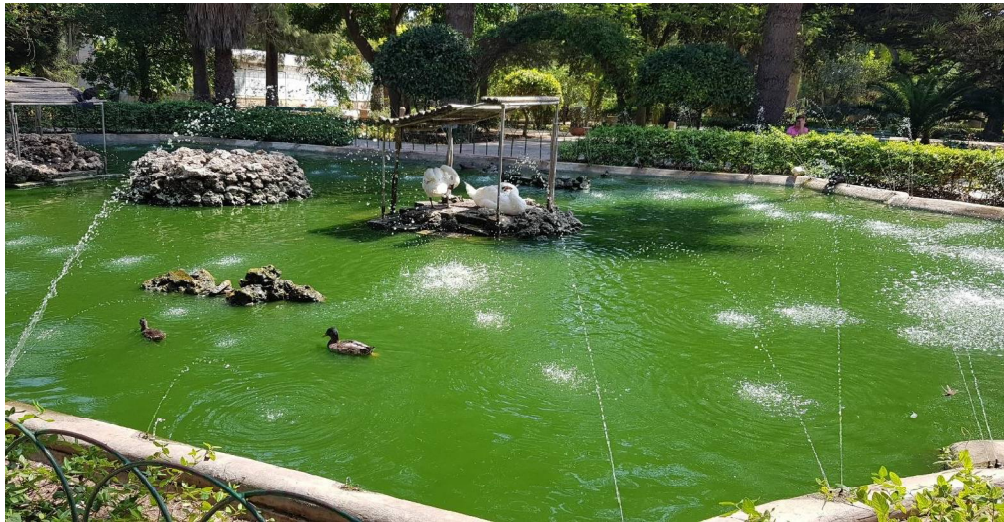


of by a number of feeders who visit them several times during the day and are normally on site by 06:00am every day to feed these cats.

With regards to the “stagnant dirty water” mentioned in the letter, it has been noted that the water in the ponds does look to be visually “green” and may look to be dirty to the untrained individual. But it has to be remarked that the green colour is a natural process of algae growing on the rocks and pond base, by the UV rays of the sun. Irrespective of how many times the water in a pond is completely changed, these algae will continue to grow, naturally.

In all the ponds present there are functional water features where the water is continually flowing and circulating, and no water was noted to be smelly and stagnant.





Regarding the care for the peacocks roaming in the gardens under the trees, we were guided to the place which is easily accessible by the birds, where these have abundant feed on site and had a water bowl from where they can drink. This is shown in picture below.



Regarding the aviaries, which we found to contain very few birds and some doves, we demanded to have access to the inside of these aviaries to witness their individual feed and water sources. It has been confirmed that all individual aviaries had more than enough feed for the very few birds present. They even had clear and fresh drinking water in the containers which were big enough to cater for the amount of birds present for several days. These aviaries are being taken care of by one of the gardeners present.



Recommendations

- 1. The care of these animals should be assigned to responsible persons who are knowledgeable on the general care of the species involved. This will ensure that proper attention is given to the animals involved.*
- 2. It is being recommended that if administratively possible, the care and responsibility of all animals at the lower San Anton Gardens mentioned in this report will be shifted under the management of the officials taking care of the animals in the Kitchen Garden, and not by gardeners/watchmen of ELC. This shift of responsibility will ensure proper and professional care for the animals, and will address the recommendation No.1 above.*
- 3. Although not directly related to the welfare of the animals and the aim of this inspection, it has been noted that the seating area around the main central pond with the white swans is not being cared for. Some of the wooden benches are full of dirt and animal droppings. This negative visual impact may lead visitors and tourists to link such derelict conditions with mismanagement of the animals. The surrounding areas must be kept clean all the time.*



Conclusion

It can be concluded that the animals which were inspected today looked healthy and in a satisfactory condition. There were no worrying situations which indicate neglect to the animals or lack of animal welfare. However, with some minor recommendations as explained above, the care of the same animals will be guaranteed to be in the hands of the proper people who are competent in their area.

It is a good and healthy practice for the authorities to hear the sincere and passionate comments of such individuals like Mrs Ironfield-Smith, because with such instances a proper assessment of the situation is done, and the necessary improvements are implemented.

Reuben Montebello
Principal Veterinary Support Officer

Ian Vella
Inspector

The only disturbing factor is not the actual condition of the animals but the fact that their care has been left in the hands of unprofessional persons, because the animals and birds have not been given any special consideration but have been considered to be part and parcel of the gardens and public areas, without any special attention to their specific needs.

It has been established that the care of the gardens, specifically the plants, flowers, shrubs and trees has been entrusted to the Environmental Landscapes Consortium Limited for the past number of years. Unfortunately, although the consortium are professionals in the field of landscaping and the maintenance of gardens and public areas and do in fact keep the Gardens in a pristine condition, they do not employ personnel proficient in the care of animals and birds or in the requirements of animal welfare or the specific requirements of each species.

At the moment the care of these animals are entrusted to the gardeners and watchmen employed by ELC and although the birds and animals are well fed and healthy, there are no guarantees of proper measures in the case any sort of problems should arise. It has to be emphasized that proper care of animals does not consist exclusively in the provision of just ample food and water but it requires the attention of personnel trained in animal welfare and care.

It is therefore recommended that, apart from the recommendations made earlier in the included report, in case of a review of the conditions governing the care and maintenance of the Gardens, specific and precise provisions have to be dedicated exclusively to the welfare of the animals therein, detailing minimum standards and competent carers.

Apart from all animal welfare considerations, it has to be again pointed out that because the San Anton Gardens are closely associated with the San Anton Palace, the official residence of the President of Malta, of which they are one of the main features and open to the public since 1882, any shortcoming could reflect negatively on the national authorities. In fact, the Gardens and the animals therein, should provide a very apt opportunity to publicize the genuine and laudable efforts that the state is making regarding animal welfare.

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Denis Montebello
Commissioner for Animal Welfare

18th September 2019

Documents Attached:

Doc 1: Complaint by Mrs. Christine Ironfield-Smith

Mr Denis Montebello
Commissioner for Animal Welfare
Office of the Commissioner for Animal Welfare
Government Buildings
Floor 2
Race Course Street
Marsa
Malta

Saturday 3rd August 2019

Dear Mr Montebello

I am writing to you to express my concern about the welfare of the animals that live within the San Anton Gardens in Attard and to ask you to please do something to improve their conditions.

I have visited the gardens many times since 2000, when I first started holidaying in Malta. My last visit was in May this year, when I was most disappointed to see no improvement in their conditions since my previous holiday in Malta in 2017. Here are my main concerns:

Cats – there are numerous abandoned cats living in the San Anton Gardens. My understanding, having spoken with various Maltese people (including friends), is that these animals are simply thrown away when they become adults, because the Maltese prefer kittens.

I am aware that volunteers from an animal welfare charity and kind local people visit the gardens to feed the cats. However, they don't all get fed and watered and so will go hungry and thirsty. Their plight is exacerbated by the hostile actions of the gardening staff, who deliberately throw away any food and water put down for them. They lack adequate shelter from the elements.

Swans – there are two enclosed ponds – one with white swans and one with black swans. They share the ponds with various ducks. The condition of the ponds is very poor, the one lived in by the black swans being particularly so (full of stagnant dirty water). The black swans have a nesting box that is not being maintained and is full of broken and abandoned eggs and dirty nesting materials. It appears that the swans and ducks are not being cared for. They are desperate for food but seem to have very little available to them.

Birds in the aviary – again, the conditions in which these captive creatures are being kept is totally inadequate and unacceptable. There appears to be no nesting materials available for ground nesting birds and while they have access to food and water I'm not sure how fresh and clean the supply is and how often it is replenished. Some don't appear to have sufficient shelter from the extreme sun and heat.

Peacocks – little to indicate that these are being cared for either – they are so hungry they steal food put down for the cats.

During my last visit I was told by a volunteer that a peacock had died and its body had been disposed of by the gardening staff in a plastic bag and put into a garden waste bin situated near the main entrance to the gardens. I leave it to your imagination as to the effect of that after a couple of days of very hot weather. Apart from the stench it is not an ecologically friendly way of disposing of a carcass.

The San Anton Gardens are one of the most popular attractions on Malta according to Trip Advisor, with visitors from all over the world. Unfortunately, the conditions in which the animals in the garden are being kept do not create a favourable impression of Malta and the priority it places on animal welfare.

Since joining the European Union in 2004, Malta's economy has gone from strength to strength and this is clearly evident. With increased prosperity comes greater responsibility to care for those less able to look after themselves and this applies not just to people, but to animals. Please take this opportunity to show that Malta is serious about animal welfare by taking action to improve the living conditions of the animals in the San Anton Gardens and those elsewhere on the Island that need and deserve your help.

Yours sincerely



Christine Ironfield-Smith (Mrs)