



02nd May 2020

Dr Denis Montebello
Commissioner for Animal Welfare

Report on investigation of neglect of animals at San Anton Gardens, Attard.

An unannounced inspection was carried out today the 02nd May 2020 at San Anton Gardens, by Reuben Montebello and Ian Vella, both from the Office of the Commissioner for Animal Welfare. This inspection was instructed by the Commissioner to investigate various allegations received from different sources related to the neglect and poor welfare of animals held at San Anton Gardens l/o Attard.

The alleged statements received were indicated to animals kept at the lower gardens of San Anton under the responsibility of ELC (Environment Landscape Consortium), and not related to the Kitchen Garden which is situated on the other side of the gardens and which falls under the responsibility of the President of Malta.

The allegations were related to the lack of proper care for the swans and ducks in the ponds, the alleged deaths of 2 swans, and the general neglect of the animals including the peacocks which have been reportedly roaming on the streets in search for food.

It is also important to mention that for this inspection there was co-ordination with the AW Department, mainly with Ms Lucienne Cassar (Assistant Director responsible from Enforcement) and we were promised that there is an ambulance with 2 animal welfare officers on stand-by and available to assist us should the need arises.

Findings on inspection

We planned to initiate the inspection at 09:00 primarily to coincide with the time when the watchman on duty gives access to the cat feeder, as per prior agreement. On entry we spoke with Mr Leo Camilleri, employed by ELC, who after consulting with his supervisor Mr Edgar Borg, gave us access to the gardens.

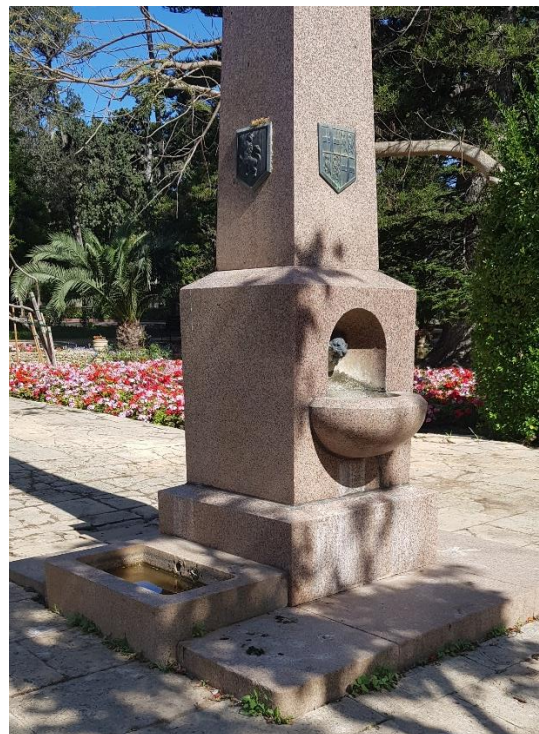
We informed Mr Camilleri that we need to see all the animals within the gardens. On entry we immediately realised that despite the fact that the San Anton gardens are closed to the public, they are still kept in very good condition, very clean and with fresh plants planted everywhere.



It is clear that the animals present on site look fine, and no signs of neglect was observed. We asked to verify the source of feed given to the birds, and we were shown different types of feed given to the different species. Mr Camilleri is responsible for the feeding of the animals, apart from the cats which are taken care of by the feeders.



On our way to start checking the various sites, it has been noted that the granite water feature which has been mentioned in our first report as being an additional source from where cats can drink, is now non-functional. We have advised that even if this water feature is just an additional source of access to water, it is highly recommended especially in these days leading to Summer that it becomes functional again. Even more so because the reason why it is not functioning is merely due to a blocked nozzle, which is a trivial issue and can be adjusted immediately.



It has also been noted that cats do have several water sources from where they can drink. The feeders visiting these gardens are definitely very dedicated, and they also do place plastic water bowls in different places within the gardens, particularly in the areas where they are fed. We have noted bowls with clear fresh water, and with cats having easy access to these bowls.



In addition to these plastic bowls, the cats have access to water and can drink from the main central pond which is filled with water to the brim and in fact all animals in the gardens have easy access to drink from this pond.

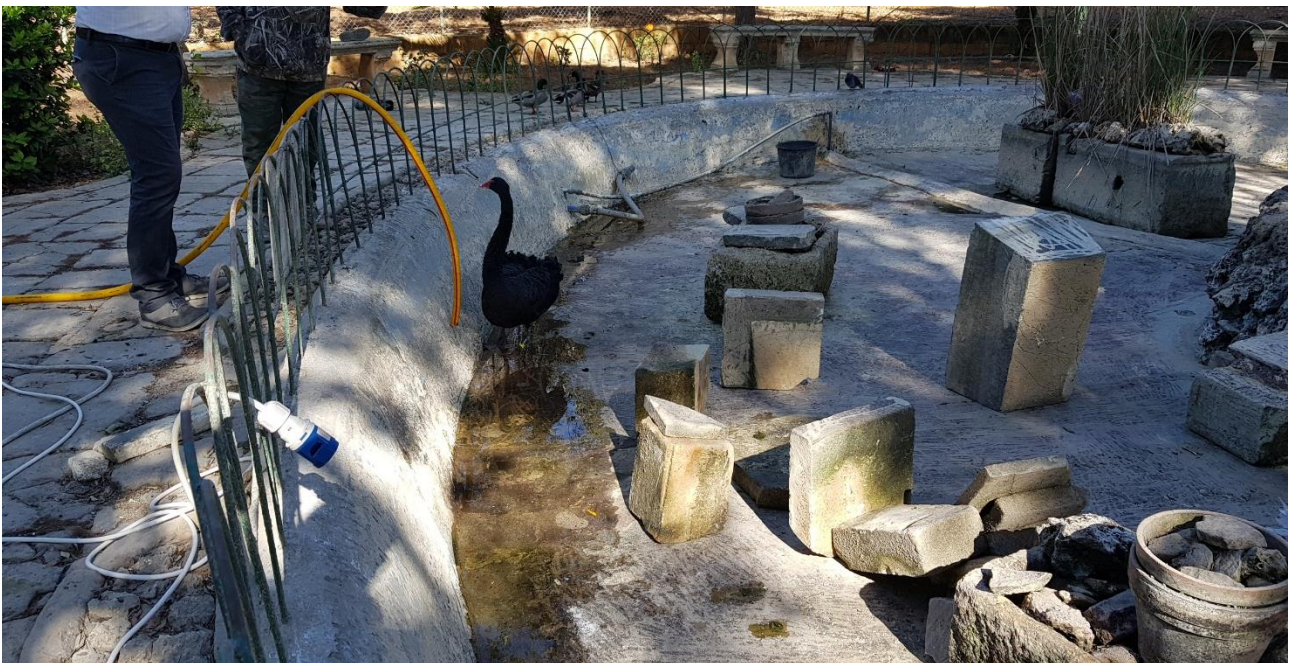


The main central pond was found to be full with water, and we observed that ducks were scattered all around the pond's area. On our arrival the pond water jets were still switched off, but on asking why the watchman on duty told us that he just arrived and this is normally the time when it is switched on. The ducks looked in a good state, alert, and have an acceptable body condition score.





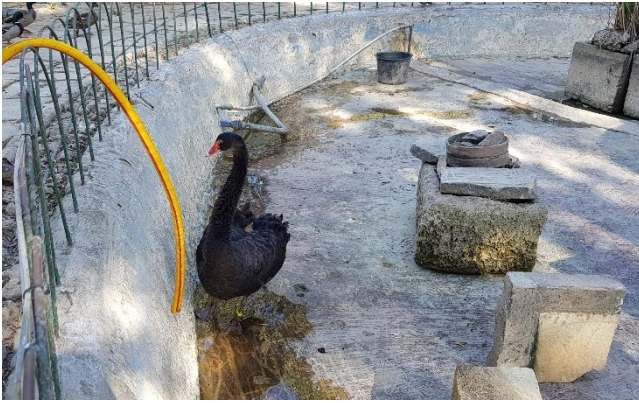
We observed that another smaller pond situated on the lateral side of the gardens, where the 2 black female swans were being kept, is now completely emptied and is undergoing maintenance works since it was leaking and had to be topped up everyday with a lot of water. We found some ducks roaming around the pond, but inside the empty pond there was one black female swan. When we asked Mr Camilleri why he left the swan there, when the pond is empty, he told us that he was worried to transfer the swan elsewhere because he thought that it may not adjust to a new pond since this was considered its home.





The only female black swan that remained in the empty pond had some buckets with water from where it can drink and eat, since it was being fed in a bucket with water where the dedicated floating feed placed there. But it was clear that this is not the appropriate environment for this swan, even if the ELC worker assured us that the works will only take a couple of days. The swan just lost its partner less than two weeks before, and this surely had a huge negative emotional impact since swans tend to bond very much with their partner. This inappropriate environment was making its life even worse.

We demanded that this is rectified immediately, and in fact with Mr Camilleri's permission, we transferred the black swan to the central pond ourselves. The swan looked very much happier in the bigger pond full of water, back in its environment, and we are sure that it will adapt to the new environment and ducks very easily.



Deaths of the two swans

When we enquired about the death of the two swans, Mr Camilleri immediately confirmed this news, and he even gave us all details.

The white swan which used to reside in the main central pond died on the 27th April, and Mr Camilleri told us that some other ELC workers informed him that this happened at around 14:00 on that day when they observed the swan falling on its back and died instantly, which could possibly indicate a sign of a heart attack.

The female black swan which was placed in the lateral pond with the other one, was found dead on 18th April by Mr Camilleri himself. No abnormal signs were observed, and he told us that both swans were healthy and eating normally. He also emphasised that when the black swan was found dead, the pond was still with water and before the maintenance works commenced.

When asked, Mr Camilleri confirmed that in both cases, ELC did not do any post-mortem examination of the birds and so no exact cause of death can be outlined. We asked him if there were any other deaths of ducks or other birds in the gardens, which may indicate a health problem within the flock, but he immediately denied any more deaths.

Peacocks

Within the San Anton Gardens, a number of peacocks were observed roaming in different areas of the gardens. There are many females, and we observed at least one male peacock. All peacocks were in very good condition, these are now in their breeding season, most of the females have egg nests, and none of them looked emaciated or lacking food.

Mr Camilleri confirmed with us that these are fed regularly in two separate places and he sees them flying around very often, sometimes they even go on the presidential palace top buildings. He does not exclude that sometimes they may go out on the public streets as well.



Bird Aviaries

The existing bird aviaries are almost completely empty, apart from one or two sections, one with love birds and another with some chickens. The ones in use have enough water and feed supply for a number of days.



Recommendations:

1. We observed a lot of feral pigeons, and as Mr Camilleri told us, during feeding time these pigeons will come in very big numbers even from nearby villages and will just invade the other water fowls and to eat with them as well. Ideally there must be a dedicated control plan for these pigeons.

It has been suggested that appropriate feeding troughs are used to feed the peacocks and ducks, rather than spreading the feed on the floor. These dedicated feeding troughs will have guards and the trough deep enough that a duck and a peacock will reach inside, but a pigeon will not manage to reach the feed inside. This management approach in depriving the access to the daily feed routine will ultimately drive the flocks of feral pigeons elsewhere.

2. The black female swan is ideally kept in a pair, and not left alone. After the death of its other female swan, it would be appropriate that another swan is placed in the same pond with the existing swan.
3. From our conversations with Mr Leo Camilleri, at first hand it has shown that he is an animal owner himself and he is also knowledgeable with the general husbandry of water fowls.

However this does not guarantee in any way the continuous and proper care of all the animals within the gardens and which are under the direct responsibility of ELC, because in the absence of Mr Camilleri the management has to inevitably rely on the services of other personnel.

This leads to our previous recommendation made in the first report of August 2019, that ELC should employ dedicated and knowledgeable staff in animal husbandry, who will be responsible for the general husbandry and care of the animals under their responsibility.

4. One other observation that we did was the lack of pest bait traps which control the breeding and reproduction of rats around the perimeter of the gardens. We even discussed this with Mr Camilleri, and he informed us that he sees big rats and he suspects that in conjunction with cats, these rats may also be the cause of very young chicks to disappear. Mr Camilleri informed us that the management will always supply poison blocks when requested, and he also informed us that he is very careful where he ties these blocks so that no animals can have access to them. Mr Camilleri himself may not be aware of any contractual agreements that the management of ELC has in place, including with pest control companies. As such, in the absence of a proper pest control plan with a professional pest control company for San Anton Gardens, it is being recommended that as part of the general management of the place, there will be one in place. If there is a contractual agreement in place, it is being recommended that more baits are put around the perimeter and the bait traps are attended and replaced as often as possible.

Conclusion

San Anton Gardens have been renowned for various generations to be visited by families and tourists not only to appreciate the landscaped areas with flowers, trees and shrubs, but also for the ducks and other animals within which over the years have bonded very much with the people visiting the gardens. The gardens will never be the same without the presence of these animals, and so the management responsible for the upkeep of these gardens including the animals within, has to ensure that these are being taken care of in the best way possible and that these are kept in immaculate conditions. And for this specific reason it has been again recommended that knowledgeable staff in animal husbandry will be responsible for the general husbandry and care of the animals.

From the investigations done today, it has been ruled out that there was any intentional neglect of the animals kept within the gardens, and no lack of welfare was observed.

It has been concluded that very few animals may approach the feeders during their feeding times not because they are hungry, but possibly because they are very much used to approach people during the normal opening hours of the gardens, which despite the signs within the same gardens not to feed the ducks, people always gave treats to these animals and they liked it. These animals are still not synced with the immediate measures imposed by the Health Authorities to close the gardens and restrict visiting times, even the cats themselves, and so they associate the feeders and any other human beings entering the gardens with the normal people who used to give them treats. Ducks and even hens are greedy by nature, and they will continue to nibble on anything available, but this does not constitute to any indication that these are deprived from feed or are being underfed and/or mistreated.

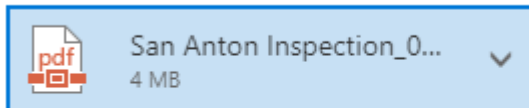
Signed:

Reuben Montebello
Principal Veterinary Support Officer

Ian Vella
Inspector

Documents Attached: emails of 1st May and covering note of 4th May 2020





Download

From: Montebello Denis at MAFA <denis.montebello@gov.mt>
Sent: Monday, 04 May 2020 11:50
To: Montebello Noel at MAFA-AWPSD <noel.montebello@gov.mt>
Cc: Ellul Konrad at MAFA-AWPSD <konrad.ellul@gov.mt>; Cassar Lucienne at MAFA-AWPSD <lucienne.cassar@gov.mt>; Romina Frendo <rominafrendo@gmail.com>; Commissioner for Animal Welfare at MAFA <caw.mafa@gov.mt>; Calamatta Paula 1 at MAFA <paula.calamatta.1@gov.mt>; Camilleri Sharlo at MAFA <sharlo.camilleri@gov.mt>; Gatt Marica at MAFA-AHWD <marica.gatt@gov.mt>; Chetcuti Ganado Duncan at MAFA-VRD <duncan.chetcuti.ganado@gov.mt>
Subject: Re: [EXTERNAL] - Re San Anton Birds' Plights - Solution

Dear Noel,

Further to my last email, two expert officials (Mr. Reuben Montebello and Mr. Ian Vella) from my office, after having liaised with your Directorate, made an unannounced visit to San Anton gardens to establish the real situation existing therein, thereby also giving your office some breathing space.

With relief, they did establish that the alarm being raised by the many reports being received was not based on any serious issues signalling an infringement of the law. My colleagues did however make the necessary recommendations and gave instructions on site which they concluded to be necessary. The set-up at this moment in time can be now deemed to be acceptable, although the recommendations made in my previous report still apply and the need to ensure the presence of someone qualified in animal and bird care is still recommended.

It is also not very difficult to explain the alarming reports that were being made. The opposition of ELC to allow the cat feeders to have an essential afternoon access did not give any assurances of any interest in animal welfare and the over-zealousness of animal lovers was not calmed down by the peacocks' roaming and the untimely deaths of the duck and the swans. In fact, there is still the issue of fixing the second feeding session for the cats to be around 5 pm. (instead of 1pm) especially in view of the ever increasing daily temperatures. This is also recommended for the feeding and watering of the other birds.

Should you find no cooperation in arranging for this new afternoon feeding time, my office will always be available for any opportune mediation.

The full report compiled by my colleagues is attached.

Denis

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Marsa - MRS 1633 – MALTA
Tel.22928618

From: Montebello Denis at MAFA

Sent: 01 May 2020 11:53

To: Montebello Noel at MAFA-AWPSD

Cc: Ellul Konrad at MAFA-AWPSD; Cassar Lucienne at MAFA-AWPSD; Romina Frendo; Commissioner for Animal Welfare at MAFA; Calamatta Paula 1 at MAFA; Camilleri Sharlo at MAFA; Gatt Marica at MAFA-AHWD; Chetcuti Ganado Duncan at MAFA-VRD

Subject: Re: [EXTERNAL] - Re San Anton Birds' Plights - Solution

Dear Noel,

Please refer to the voluminous correspondence on the subject of San Anton animals and birds.

This recent issue again highlights both the need to discover the reasons behind the extreme resistance of the Consortium to grant unfettered access to the cat feeders (hopefully not for financial considerations) and the conclusions I had arrived at in my report regarding the lack of competent personnel to take care of the animals housed at the gardens forming part of the Presidential Palace. (email of 21/3/20220 attached).

To shackle the cat feeders to do all the feeding by 1 p.m., in this hot weather does not make sense, especially when no one else seems interested in feeding the cats at San Anton.

San Anton Gardens and the animals kept therein, because they are notoriously linked to the President should be a prime example of the treatment that both gardens and animals deserve.

Having birds, and possibly other inmates, escaping is bad enough but it will be much worse if this escape has been prompted by lack of provisions and proper care and the stress being meted. This is definitely very bad for the promotion of animal welfare and destroys any headway made by this office and the Ministry in one foul stroke.

A serious investigation should now be conducted and the cat feeders allowed to make up some of the shortcomings without any further hindrance.

Best Regards

Denis

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