

LCQ10: Painting shells of live turtles with oil paints

Following is a question by the Dr Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (November 21):

Question:

It has been reported that painting the shells of live red-eared sliders (painted turtles) with colourful oil paints has become popular overseas in recent years, and this trend has spread to Hong Kong in recent months. Painted turtles are available for sale in some shops, and a red-eared slider fully painted in gold colour was found by some members of the public in a pond in Kowloon Park. Some experts have pointed out that the harmful substances in paints will enter the bloodstream of turtles through the shells; paints will hinder turtles' absorption of sunlight, making it difficult for them to produce vitamin D and hence affecting their bone structures; and paints applied on the noses and heads of turtles may cause turtles to suffocate to death because of blockage of their airways. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of complaints relating to painted turtles received in the past 12 months, and whether follow-up actions were taken, by the authorities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether the acts of painting the shells of live turtles with oil paints and selling painted turtles are subject to regulation under the existing legislation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it has taken measures to curb the trend of painting the shells of live turtles with oil paints, e.g. calling upon members of the public and shops not to buy or sell painted turtles; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) In the past 12 months, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has received a public enquiry about painted turtles being sold in shops. After receiving the enquiry, AFCD immediately contacted and inspected all licensed shops selling pet turtles over the territory, and did not find any act of selling painted turtles. AFCD also visited the Kowloon Park and did not find any painted turtles there.

(2) and (3) All animal traders are required to obtain a licence for their operations from the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation under

the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Trading and Breeding) Regulations (Cap. 139B). AFCD also issues codes of practice (CoPs) to licenced animal traders, requiring them, among others, to observe the relevant regulations on prevention of cruelty to animals. Any breach of the CoPs may be considered as a breach of the licence condition, and that AFCD may take further action. Applying oil paints on turtles is not encouraged by AFCD for the sake of animal health. AFCD will advise licenced animal traders against selling painted turtles during inspections.

If the substances in paints have negative impact on the health of turtles, the act of painting may constitute a breach of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Cap. 169). Any person who cruelly treats an animal and causes it unnecessary suffering commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of \$200,000 and imprisonment for up to three years. AFCD or other related departments will take follow-up actions upon receiving reports of cruelty to animals.

AFCD will continue to enhance public education to promote messages on responsible pet ownership and prevention of cruelty to animals. To further safeguard animal welfare, as announced by the Chief Executive in her 2018 Policy Address, the Government is mapping out the major direction and drawing up preliminary proposals for amending the legislation related to animal welfare, with a view to consulting the public early next year. The proposals include introducing a positive duty of care on animal keepers and exploring raising the penalties for acts of cruelty to animals.