

Pigeons' Poignant Plight

Celebrated in May, Vesak Day (or Phat Dan in Vietnamese) recognises a major event in the Buddhist calendar: the Buddha's Birth. Worldwide, the Sangha, lay followers and curious onlookers partake in a range of activities designed to express deep gratitude for a teacher who left a legacy of love, wisdom and insight extending 2559 years to date (it has been 2559 years since the Buddha became enlightened at 31 years of age). Vesak activities can include chanting, bathing a baby Buddha, offering flowers, candles and incense, eating vegetarian food, donating to charities, and releasing caged birds.

In recent times, the latter activity has been looked on with increasing concern, due to the likelihood of birds being released into urbanised areas. In crowded city areas, many birds which have been caged hitherto find it difficult to seek shelter; sometimes they are even the victims of merciless bird-poachers.

At Quang Minh Temple, a similar concern led to the cancellation of a Vesak Day tradition which saw dozens of pigeons and finches released into the wild. After several birds were discovered dead a few days following their release a few years ago, Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan quickly put an end to the practice.

So the question of how to celebrate Vesak Day remained – and indeed there would be the usual children's concert, chanting, vegetarian food, and bathing a baby Buddha. All of these events were well attended by special guests, which included the Most Venerable Thich Phuoc Hue, the Honourable Andrew Robb, MP, Mr. Sang Nguyen, MLC, Mr. Bruce Mildenhall MP, and Ms. Nicola Roxon, MP.

Luckily, Mr. Peter Haffenden, Director of Living Museum and Mr. Stephen Croci, a teacher from Footscray City College, were also on hand to help Venerable Phuoc Tan launch a project aiming to restore almost four hectares of the Maribyrnong River Escarpment adjoining the temple, and provide safe and adequate housing to animals such as birds and bats.

Cylindrical nesting boxes (to complement the natural shape of tree trunks) were presented to the audience, with Mr. Haffenden, Mr. Croci and Venerable Phuoc Tan speaking about the process of constructing the boxes, and how they would help attract native animals to the area.

A second component of the project, tree-planting, was also launched at the ceremony. Although the temple, in conjunction with volunteers and VUCIP (Victoria University Community Initiatives Program) participants, has already helped plant some 10,000 native trees and grasses in the escarpment area, this is still short of the 60,000 plants a landscaping architect envisaged was required to return the area to its former, pre-settler condition.

As Venerable Phuoc Tan says, 'We cannot live a happy life if those around us are suffering.' This includes supporting the environment of those we are trying to help – the animals. So if you want to get involved and help plant some trees, please feel free. A major tree planting day is scheduled for July 30. Tree planting is expected to run until September this year.

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