

The Pitfalls of “Mercy Release”

When Good Intentions Alone Fall Short

Let’s start with a nice, [heartwarming story](#) that happened right here in Humen, Dongguan. At the 2nd Annual Mercy Release Festival, countless fish, shrimp, and turtles were released into the sea. Most of the fish and shrimp swam away, except for this one little turtle who kept coming straight back onto land, despite being released several times farther and farther away from shore. The releaser picked the little guy up, examined him, and chucked him far out to sea with a hefty throw – *it was for his own good*. Home at last, he did not come back to shore. This Nanfang Daily story was titled “A Sea Turtle Refusing to Go Home”.

There is only one minor problem – this was not a sea turtle, but a [yellow-headed tortoise](#). A *land* tortoise. It begs a more disturbing question: what exactly were the other “turtles” released into the sea? A fair guess is that the turtles were obtained from the wet market, pet market, or their breeders. Unfortunately, since sea turtles are endangered and not captive-bred, those are almost certainly fresh water turtles or land tortoises. Remember that I said this was a heartwarming story? I lied.



What Is Mercy Release?

[Mercy release](#) is a common practice in Asia where animals in captivity are released into the wild. It is mainly based on the Buddhist belief that freeing a captured animal brings good karma to the releaser. Similar but distinct concepts also exist in western culture, such as [wildlife rehabilitation](#), “[catch and release](#)” fishing, even the traditional Thanksgiving Presidential [turkey pardon](#).

In western practices, the focus is on the animal; namely, whether it will survive and thrive in the wild. In contrast, an Asian mercy release focuses less on the animal and more on the releaser; namely, what spiritual and social benefits the releaser can reap. So, is mercy release really a good idea? Let’s take a look.

The Rationale Behind Mercy Release

To understand mercy release, we must first examine rebirth. Rebirth is a [fundamental concept](#) of Buddhism, in which a person or animal repeatedly reincarnates as another animal, until one has finally been hazed enough and accepted as a member of the God Country Club. In this worldview, the circle of empathy is expanded to include animals, and releasing animals into the wild is seen as a demonstration of mercy. Quantified mercy is known as [karma](#), the [KPI](#) for rebirth. Animals are legal tender in the karma marketplace, and larger ones [carry more value](#). Presumably by releasing enough biomass, one can buy enough good karma to dress up the balance sheet, ensuring that the next reincarnation will be as a privileged first world human and not an animal in the mercy release queue.

Unintended Consequences

What was once a spiritual, symbolic, and relatively harmless ceremony has taken a turn for the worse in recent years. Today most large mercy releases are highly scripted and organized events, with a standard operating procedure (SOP) dictating everything from marketing, securing funds, vendor selection, purchase orders, media coverage, to chanty-monk rental. The release dates are set on holy days, which must inexplicably coincide with the date and season for optimal survivability. And when they don't? Well, that's really not a human problem. Release them anyway, *it's for their own good*. The releasers got their karma and that's the important part.

Incredibly, these large organized releases are considered the better ones; private mercy releases are often far worse. Once one has accepted the notion that Karma can be bought by proxy, then salvation itself carries a price tag, and money is simply a [unit of caring](#). Naturally, if a little salvation is good, a lot of salvation is better, and an obscene amount of salvation is the best. Many private mercy releases combine selfishness, lack of education and awareness, ignorance, newfound wealth, abundance of exotic wildlife for sale, and extravagant one-upmanship to create truly disturbing masturbatory spectacles. Some egregious examples include [deadly snakes](#) in parks and [near schools, dumping 2 tons of frogs, crocodiles, African clawed frogs, thousands of snakes](#) (in someone else's village of course), [rock pythons](#), red-eared sliders, [25 cobras in Shanghai](#), [foxes](#), [raccoons](#), [thousands of rats](#), and [15 tons of hairy crab](#). There is a Chinese version of the saying "all for one, and one for all", which is "all for one, and that one is *me*". 'Nuff said.

Of course, the vicious circle is not complete without a supply system. Never to let a good business opportunity go to waste, specialized vendors provide "mercy release" animals in large quantities, complete with a separate team to [recapture the released animals](#) and close the loop. An easy catch, it turns out, since most are already in a weakened state having suffered many catch-release cycles. After applying attrition management (chucking out the dead ones), the animals are ready for more mercy. The vendors have a green and renewable source of animals, and the customers get a good price – a win-win scenario. That is, except for the animals whose lives were meant to be saved through, uh, mercy.

The Goal of Mercy Release

The result of this repeatedly applied mercy is increased suffering, which is viewed as collateral damage, the cost of doing business, and an ugly means to a selfish end. It may be true that the releaser did not intend for suffering to occur; yet as an enabler of real harm, it is a moral distinction without a practical difference.

Mercy should be about reducing suffering, and that entails far more than simply opening the cage door. It includes health check and treatment, evaluation, training, capacity, environment assessment, and many other factors, all designed to maximize the chance that the released animal can thrive, and also not cause others to suffer. And sometimes when rehabilitation is not possible, true mercy comes in the form of ending the suffering humanely.

In western practices, the reduction of suffering is the primary goal; in mercy release, it is ancillary at best. While one is not precluded from executing a well thought out, responsible mercy release, the introduction of a perceived reward for the releaser pits the human's imaginary interest against the animals' real interest, and the human's will invariably come first. It also changes the nature of the act from pure altruism into a transaction.

Conclusion

Mercy release started out with a noble intention, but has evolved into a mostly unsophisticated practice more concerned about appearance than actual compassion. Real mercy should be measured in the outcome of the animal and the environment, not the income of the releaser. Rather than pretending to make a difference by buying and dumping animals, it is far more effective to support the conservation organizations who can make an actual difference. So when it comes to mercy release, don't try this at home. It's for their own good.

References:

1. [一只拒绝回家的海龟](#), Netease/Nanfang Daily
2. [Indotestudo elongata](#), The Reptile Database
3. [Mercy Release](#), Humane Society International
4. [Wildlife Rehabilitation](#), Wikipedia
5. [Catch and Release Fishing](#), Native Fish Australia
6. [Turkey Pardons, The Stuffing of Historic Legend](#), The Washington Post
7. [Karma](#), Wikipedia
8. [Key Performance Indicators \(KPI\)](#), About.com
9. [放生](#), Baidu Baike
10. [Money: The Unit of Caring](#), LessWrong.com
11. [广东：女子在公园放生眼镜蛇、狼等毒蛇猛兽](#), 凤凰资讯
12. [福州一县道现被放生毒蛇 距小学仅 500 米](#), 新浪新闻中心
13. [中国式放生乱象](#), 芙蓉新闻网
14. [邯郸现食人鳄：盘点盲目放生导致的悲剧](#), 腾讯新闻
15. [盘点那些奇葩“放生” 5 人从化放生千隻老鼠](#), 人民网
16. [狐狸浣熊等上千只动物被放生 两天死一半](#), 未来网新闻
17. [东昌滨江绿地附近“放生”形成产业链且变了味](#), 东方网