



Report on the environment and welfare of animals at the Ta' Qali Petting Farm 17th November 2021

Over the past months, The Office of The Commissioner has been alerted by the general public to several issues at The Petting Farm in Ta Qali. Some of the issues were brought forward directly to the office via email, whilst others were shared on social media, causing public outrage.

The latest one from the 13th November 2021, regarding Muriel the donkey, is attached for your perusal.

Upon inspection, the cases that were brought to our attention, including that of the donkey, never turned out to be cases of negligence or mistreatment, but since the petting farm is open to the public, it needs to cater to public perceptions and knowledge.

In addition, being a petting farm that is open to the general public and school children, the level of care should be way above the average farm. As an educational outlet, it should be setting a higher standard with regards to the animals' environment, and exploiting every opportunity to educate future generations about animal care.

Our recommendations are therefore aimed at improving the animals' environment and communicating effectively with the visiting public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environment:

As the previous Commissioner for Animal Welfare indicated in 2019, there are a few shortcomings that can be identified in terms of the animal's environment.

1. The 2019 report indicated that some herd animals were on their own. Today there is a donkey, a lama, a pigmy goat and a goat, all living alone, when they will surely benefit from some companionship, preferably of the same species. This has still not been addressed since 2019 and should be given priority.
2. The 2019 report also indicated that since the ruminants and equines do not really have any pasture areas, it is important that they are walked or are otherwise kept active.
3. The gravel flooring is far from ideal for equines. It has been indicated to the Office of the Commissioner that this will be replaced by sand shortly. Kindly indicate a timeline for this.
4. Whilst indoor and outdoor spaces are more than adequate in size, **they all lack any form of enrichment**. This can lead to boredom and 'learned helplessness'. In fact, some animals are chewing at the perimeter wood which indicates boredom and frustration. The donkey, which is the first animal visitors see as soon as they walk into the farm, looks particularly bored always in the same corner, resting on the same wall, facing the same way. She is even unresponsive to attention from visitors. Whilst boredom might not be considered cruelty in absolute terms, it can affect animals very negatively both physically and mentally. In these links you will find some ideas for animal enrichment which we strongly suggest for consideration:
 - <https://donkeywise.org/2016/05/19/10-easy-enrichment-ideas-for-donkeys/><https://opensanctuary.org/article/creating-an-enriching-environment-for-goats/>
 - <https://enrichingequines.com/5-minute-horse-enrichment-cereal-box-feeder/>

Communication:

Most of the visiting public will have no experience of farms or farm animals, thus communicating and educating them about the keeping of farm animals is essential. The distinction between farm and domestic animals needs to be made so as to avoid negative perceptions and also serve as an educational exercise.

Whilst it is understandable that members of staff cannot interact with visitors, general signage around the petting farm can serve a myriad of communicative purposes - from showing that the animals at the farm are not just a number, to educating people about different species and informing the public when an animal is under treatment etc.

Our recommendation is therefore to install signs next to each animal indicating the following:

1. The name of the animal, species, age, some basic information about the species (feeding, breeding, climate), and this particular character. If the animal is a rescue, this should be indicated.
2. If the animal is undergoing medical treatment, especially if the ailment is visible to the public, add another sign to explain what the condition is and that it's being treated. This puts people's minds at rest and again proves that the animals are cared for.
3. Since most of the indoor areas of animals are not visible to the public, people won't know for example that every animal has a water source, bedding and fans inside. This information should be included on the outdoor signage, even if possible, with a photo showing the inside.
4. Every sign should include a contact number, should any member of the public need to report something. This avoids people going on Facebook instead of directly to a staff member.
5. Information about the cleaning and feeding frequency should also be visible.
6. All this should be shared on the Petting Farm's social. The Facebook Page for the Petting Farm has not been updated in a very very long time. In addition, the website link advertised on it does not load.

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Petting%20Farm%20-%20Ta%20Qali/112915488878537/>

<http://msdec.gov.mt/en/Pages/PARKS/The-Petting-Farm.aspx>