



Ms Alison Bezzina  
Commissioner for Animal Welfare

25<sup>th</sup> February 2022

### **Inspection at San Anton Gardens**

An unannounced inspection was carried out on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 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, particularly related to underfeeding 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.

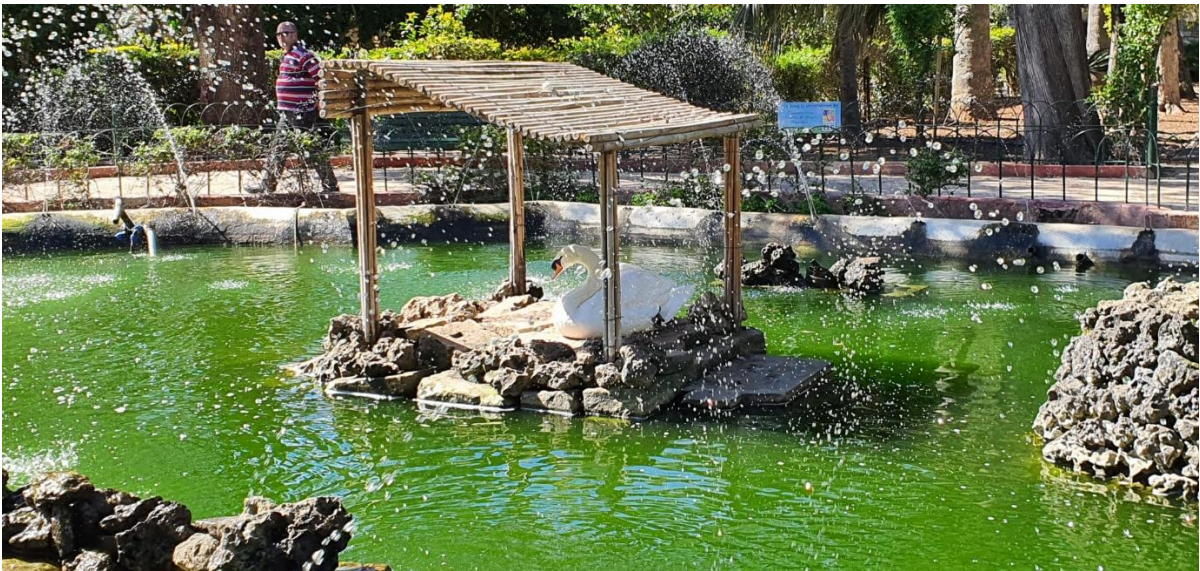
We arrived on site at around 12:30, and immediately went around the gardens to observe the birds on site. It can be noticed that there are a large number of chickens roaming around under the trees around the flower beds. It could also be noted that the majority of these chickens tend to approach the visitors without any fear, trying to nibble from leftovers.

Moving towards the two ponds further uphill, in one of the ponds there is a solitary female black swan, which had also laid 6 eggs in its nest.





The main central pond was also noted to be in good condition. In this central pond, there was only one white swan.



All birds that were observed around the gardens were noted to be alert, and of a good visual body condition.

We proceeded to the management office where the garden personnel are stationed. We met with Mr Mario Pace, who identified himself as the Manager in charge. He is employed by the Ministry for the Environment, and not with ELC. Specifically, he said that they fall under Ambient Malta, and his Director is Mr Francis Farrugia. He explained that ELC is the private consortium in charge of the upkeep and management of the gardens, and his office is in charge to ensure that everything is ok.

When we asked him to speak with the person in charge of feeding the animals, specifically to see the type of feed that they are given and their feeding schedule, we have been informed by some of the ELC employees on site that the person in charge of this took half day vacation leave, and we could not access the room where feed is stored. We asked what happens if this person reports sick on the day, with no access to feed store, the justification given was that there is a security officer with ELC who is also responsible to feed the animals in the evening, and so there is a second person available.

On this issue, we were linked through a telephone call with Mr. Norman Mifsud (Assistant General Manager ELC), and he confirmed all that was previously discussed with Mr Pace. He also suggested that the day after, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2022, we will be contacted by the ELC Foreman and inspect the feed store.

In fact the day after, we were contacted by Mr Edgar Borg ( ELC Foreman), and once meeting on site we confirmed the feed given to the birds. The waterfowls are given a specific type of feed which floats in the water.



## **Recommendations**

- 1.** The black female swan is ideally kept in a pair, and not left alone, as already suggested in our previous report date 03/05/2020. The white swan in the main pond is also kept alone. Just like the black swan, these should ideally be kept in pairs.
- 2.** For the natural control on the reproduction of birds around the gardens, it has been verbally suggested that the workers tending for the upkeep of these gardens should locate the places where these chickens and peacocks are nesting and laying their eggs, and these should be taken away all the time. This will disrupt the procreation cycle of further generations and limit the uncontrolled hatching of chicks which is aggravating the situation.
- 3.** An immediate measure should be taken by the management to reduce the number of birds roaming around the gardens. A professional catching exercise should be planned and a number of chickens and peacocks should be moved away from these gardens, and rehomed elsewhere. It has been explained and emphasized that responsible rehoming of animals is the best way forward to control the situation.
- 4.** From the information we have been given by Mr Mario Pace, it seems that ELC is just a caretaker contractor for this year, up to when the new contractor will take over the management of San Anton Gardens among other landscaping areas. If a decision is taken with the new contractor that animals will remain part of the garden attractions, then a professional management plan should be agreed and form part of the operational contract. The new contractor should have knowledgeable people in animal husbandry employed and responsible for the management of these animals. The new management plan should include the containment of these birds in specific locations within the gardens, to limit the landscaping damages that are being done, and also to limit the number of birds present within the gardens at any specific time. There are animal welfare friendly measures that can be adapted to have birds such as peacocks and chickens roaming freely under the trees. Ideally, information placards should be set up near each containment area with information to the public about the species.
- 5.** It is also being recommended to be suggested to the new management to consider embarking on a management exercise where the food used within the San Anton Gardens will be mixed with a sterilization medical substance, under the professional advice of a veterinarian, to limit the fertilisation of eggs and hence control the number of birds within the gardens. This exercise will be like the pigeon control exercise currently being used by local councils to control feral pigeon population in various localities in Malta.
- 6.** Prominent signs should be set up not to feed the birds, but also clearly explaining why the public should not feed the birds. The general public needs to understand that feeding the birds can be detrimental to their health and possibly fatal to the birds, since the majority think that prohibiting feeding is cruel if the reason behind is not given.

7. The derelict area where the big old metal cages still stand, is definitely not a showcase of good animal husbandry. Some of the existing cages are empty and some of them holding just a few pigeons and some hens. This area needs to be seriously upgraded and properly managed to reflect good management practices.

### **Conclusions**

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. Ducks and even hens are greedy by nature, and they will nibble on anything available, but this does not constitute to any indication that these are being deprived from feed or are being underfed and/or mistreated.

*Signed:*

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Principal Veterinary Support Officer

**Ian Vella**  
Inspector