

SCMP

Headline: Animal welfare for a modern city

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The past 180 years have been a thrilling roller-coaster ride for Hong Kong. In the early 1800s, what was to become one of the most dynamic cities on earth was a just small fishing village with a population of 7,500, a haven for seafaring traders and pirates.

Since then the city has experienced colonial rule, wars, social unrest, manufacturing success, a remarkable transition to a service economy, a booming property market and a burgeoning population. Average incomes have gone up, high-rises built, fortunes made, and fortunes lost.

Say anything about Hong Kong, for all its faults – the air quality, property prices or the lack of space – but you can never accuse Hong Kong of being dull.

But what is lacking is the genuine acknowledgement that animals are important in our lives. It's not that Hong Kong has no capacity for love and compassion. Far from it. The university I work at has received numerous generous donations over the years, reflecting deep-seated philanthropic urges among the community. In fact, I was once given a cheque by a gastroenterologist following a medical procedure simply because he wanted to support our new school of veterinary medicine. What's more, we love food and drink, like in Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*, while Wong Kar-wai's *In The Mood For Love* drew out the passion and romance that simmers beneath the city's skyscrapers.

Love can survive almost anywhere: it even blossomed when the woman who helped turn Cheung Po Tsai 張保仔 into a pirate eventually married him, no doubt against the wishes of her kidnapper of a husband!

But can Hong Kong extend compassion to animals? Can a city truly be called modern if it resolutely fails to appreciate the complex relationship between humans and animals, or see that animal welfare matters.

One of the aims at the university where I work is to highlight how taking the lead in veterinary medicine can be a great boost to Hong Kong in several ways. Veterinary training can help combat zoonotic diseases that threaten public health and economic prosperity. It can contribute to food safety, too, a major concern for this part of the world in the wake of several regional food contamination scandals, and it can enhance food production through aquaculture, the world's fastest developing food source. And it can contribute closer to home by promoting animal welfare for companion and large animals.

Consider this very basic problem by way of illustration. A third of the world's population has no access to electricity. Entrenched poverty and inequality mean billions of people have inadequate, or no, access to clean water, schools and medical care, and so live shorter lives. Under such conditions the likelihood that diseases such as SARS, Ebola and Zika will evolve and break out increases. As we recall from SARS in 2003, a disease can rapidly transit from such impoverished areas via animals and infect human populations living in "modern" cities, with tragic results.

Hong Kong has shown great leadership in the years since SARS in human medicine, but we need more young people to train for careers in biomedical research, government, policymaking, caring for companion animals, treating large animals, enhancing food safety and boosting food production.

But, and here's the catch, Hong Kong is not a city that innovates. It adapts, for sure. It survives, no doubt. It follows, and copes, but it does not set the pace. And it especially does not have a strong record in recognising that the natural world and the environment are fundamental to our identity as humans.

This is our loss because our relationship with other creatures on earth defines who we are as humans. I don't mean that all Hong Kongers should necessarily own pets. Rather, I am talking about One Health, the movement aimed at creating an inclusive relationship between medical doctors and veterinarians in recognition of the interdependency between humans and animals. I am talking about understanding zoonotic diseases that threaten our safety and our economic prosperity. I am talking about food safety and public health in general, and about food production, such as aquaculture.

Over the next few days an international conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, will be coordinating, and encouraging, responses to the myriad problems facing the natural world today. The 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP17) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) is one of many international initiatives aimed at highlighting the plight of the natural world and building harmonies with nature.

I hope that Hong Kong will host such events in future when this city is recognised for its contributions to animal welfare and veterinary medicine.

Professor Way Kuo, Member of US National Academy of Engineering, is President of City University of Hong Kong. The article is based on his speech at the launch ceremony for CityU's new six-year bachelor of veterinary medicine programme at Happy Valley Jockey Club on 19 September 2016.