

Underground reptile and amphibian market surfaces at the Ashford International Hotel

Monday 15 July, 2024

A public hunt for the whereabouts of an underground reptile and amphibian market planned for 13th July 2024 somewhere in Ashford ended on Friday when organisers revealed it would take place at the Ashford International Hotel. Following the cancellation of the event at a school in Gillingham, event organisers announced that details of the new location in Ashford would not be made public. Event details were instead privately released to members of the secretive, organising group, the Amphibian and Reptile Group (ARC), on Friday evening after council offices were shut.

Undercover investigators from the Animal Protection Agency and Freedom for Animals gathered evidence of 'pet' animal trading at the market, an activity that is illegal under a 1983 amendment to the Pet Animals Act 1951. Although the event was described as an exhibition, investigators filmed animal selling and the offering of animals for sale at discounted prices. Stallholders, including licensed pet shops, displayed a wide range of reptile and amphibian species alongside their business names and banners. It was made clear by commercial dealers that animals were available to buy, and cash or card payments were accepted. Evidence of what campaigners believe to be unlawful activity obtained from the Ashford International Hotel event will be passed to Ashford Borough Council.

The treatment of animals at the event was very poor, and typical of reptile markets. Film was taken of wild animals barely able to move in small plastic containers, without food, water or anywhere to hide - conditions that result in inevitable animal suffering. Animal groups have expressed surprise that a 4-star hotel would become embroiled in such notorious activities. Earlier in the week, Ashford International Hotel had been contacted, along with other venues, and made aware of the public appeal for information but the General Manager declined to confirm or deny the event was taking place there.

Says Elaine Toland, Director, Animal Protection Agency:

"The hotel was given advance notice of what was likely to take place at this event. We had already obtained evidence of the likelihood of criminal activity and passed it to Ashford Borough Council, and that same evidence brought about the cancellation of the event at the school in Gillingham. Ashford International Hotel, what were you thinking?!"

Says Laura Walton, Campaigns Manager, Freedom for Animals:

"Our investigators found what they always find at these events: animal suffering and activities which in our view are criminal. So no surprises there! We are very surprised however that the Ashford International Hotel would host such an event, especially given the well-documented problems with reptile markets and the public outcry they generate."

Says Dr Charlotte Regan, Wildlife Campaign Manager, World Animal Protection:

"Every individual reptile or amphibian sold at one of these markets is a sentient animal - not a product to be exploited for money. Reptile markets are inherently associated with a number of serious welfare issues that can cause significant animal suffering. They are outdated events that should have no place in our society."

According to scientific studies, reptile markets pose a serious risk to public health due to the close proximity of people to animals and the post-event contamination of venues. Animals that are sick and stressed are far more likely to shed pathogens and spread disease, and vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women and the elderly are most at risk – particularly from reptile related salmonellosis.

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