

My pet has a passport

Pet passports will help with disease control and promote the traceability of animals in the country, writes Aneeta Sundaraj

BEFORE you go to sleep, you check to make sure everything is in the folder: Photographs, completed application forms and copies of relevant documents. By 8.30am the next day, you submit everything to the officer in charge and the applicants are processed. Once the fees are paid, you wait for 15 minutes and voila, you hold a set of passports — one for Bruno (the Rottweiler), one for Boboy (the cat) and one for Mambo (the rabbit). Seriously, passports for pets?

Datuk Dr Quaza Nizamuddin Hassan Nizam, 52, director of the Department of Veterinary Services, says the pet passport was introduced to create a database of animals in the country under the Malaysian Animals Traceability System.

“Also, when your pet’s lost, this database will help us track its whereabouts.”

Dr P. Ravinderan, 56, a veterinary clinician and surgeon in Alor Setar, elaborates on this point. “It is a form of national identification. If your dog happens to be wandering around the neighbourhood and gets caught by the officials, the microchip embedded in its neck will tell us that it’s not a stray animal. We can then check the system and locate its registered owner.”

“Many other countries have already introduced this system,” says Dr Clement Anthony, president of the Malaysian Small Animal Welfare Association.

According to both Quaza and Clement, the underlying reason for establishing the need for a pet passport is disease control.

“With the pet passport,” says Quaza, “we hope to be able to easily identify when there is an outbreak of disease like rabies. Of course, Malaysia has been rabies-free for years. But, Thailand is not. So, we have a 50km buffer zone from the border. And it’s not just dogs we look at. Cats and other animals can develop rabies as well. Horses also often suffer from strangles. Then there are emerging zoonotic diseases. These are diseases that can be passed from animal to man like leptospirosis and toxoplasmosis. With the pet passport and the database, we’ll know where there’s an outbreak and can control it faster.”

If you love taking photos of your pet, you’ll have a field day. Unlike a human passport, you’ll have to take four separate photos of your pet — one with your pet looking to the front (seated), two side profiles (one from the right and one from the left) and one of his back.

Besides having a comprehensive list of the breeds in the country, the pet passport will identify the types of pet owners. For instance, are they single, women, divorced or families? “You may think it’s not important, but I’ve been in Alor Setar for years and I cannot tell you the exact number of animals and pet owners there,” says Ravi.

Clement, who owns a veterinary practice in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, agrees. “I have over 6,000 clients, but I can’t tell you how many dogs there are in any one area. If this database could

tell me that there are 1,000 dogs in this area, I would be able to ask the Council why there are no facilities such as a park to walk the dogs when they've collected so much money for the dogs' licences."

In what is music to the ears of those who live in apartments, flats and condominiums, Clement adds: "If we can see how many people living in condominiums are keeping dogs, we can develop something like what they have in Singapore, where people are allowed to keep pets. You won't have people keeping cats and dogs knowing that it's illegal to do so."

Naturally, the welfare of your pet will be monitored. For example, if the database shows that your dwelling space is no more than 111sq metres, it might be possible to keep Bruno, Boboy and Mambo. If all three are, in fact, Alsatians, questions may be asked as to whether there is enough space for all of you. Also, when your pet dies, you'll now have to inform your vet and the database will reflect this sad event.

Does the pet passport do away with the need for licences, then? "No," says Quaza. "The pet passport is a one-off document. A pet passport is only issued by the Department of Veterinary Services or registered vets. Licences are issued by Councils."

According to Clement, this means that, for the time being, if you live in Subang Jaya, you might have to ask your neighbours' permission before Bruno becomes a licensed dog. If you're in the Federal Territory, as long as he's properly vaccinated, Boboy will be issued a licence. If you live in Alor Setar, Mambo will have to be vaccinated against rabies before he gets his licence.

When the suggestion is made that the pet passport is probably no more than the human equivalent of an identity card, Ravi insists: "It's bigger than the identity card. With the passport, your pet can travel overseas."

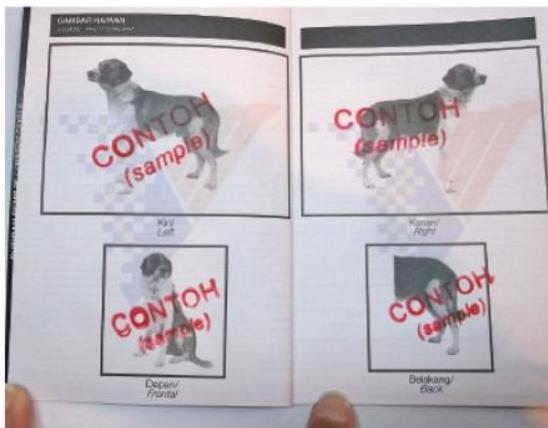
Don't pack Bruno's bags yet. Clement puts the brakes on any travel plans when he explains that, since Malaysia will be classified as rabies-free by the Organisation of International Enzootic Diseases (which monitors outbreaks of diseases globally) at the end of last year, pets should theoretically have free passage in and out of the country.

"It will only actually be possible when there is government-to-government understanding on this issue," he says, adding: "Why talk about other countries? We can't even take a pet to Sabah right now. And it's in the same country."

At present, it's possible to denounce the pet passport as nothing more than a fancy document. However, all three vets insist that this is a defeatist conclusion and dismisses the positive intention behind the introduction of the pet passport which is this: It is the baseline upon which to promote the welfare of all animals in the country.



Scanner placed on the neck of a dog to read the microchip number embedded in the animal.



Pages in the passport where your animal picture will be pasted



Pet Passport