



# STEERING HIS OWN PATH

*AN ORPHANED STEER WHO RUNS WITH THE PUI O BUFFALO,  
BILLY HAS BECOME A LOCAL LEGEND. ROBERT CLARK INVESTIGATES.*

It's lunchtime on Good Friday, and visitors from all over Hong Kong and points north have flocked to sunny Pui O Beach.

Lunch preparations in the busy picnic area have attracted the attention of a determined local resident, who starts nosing among the plastic bags and Tupperware. Some try to ignore the 350 kg guest, others move their food out of reach. One group tries throwing sand at him until another local arrives on the scene.

"He lives here," she points out. "Do you?"

Welcome to Billy's world. Or rather, one of Billy's worlds.

The dark tan steer has inhabited several communities in his short life. Orphaned at an early age and hand-reared, Billy now runs with Pui O buffalo, though he still remembers the humans who raised him.

Billy thinks he's a buffalo, or maybe a human or a dog. Or maybe it's because cattle are naturally social. Almost everyone you speak to seems to know Billy or have a tale about him. He is probably the closest Lantau has to a local celebrity.

Billy's story begins in late 2010, when he was born into the Tong Fuk herd, one of Lantau's half a dozen village cattle herds. Life changed dramatically when he was four or five months old after his ageing mother was put down by an SPCA vet.



Photo by: Lantau Buffalo Association

That meant Billy was now vulnerable, despite the presence of the herd. He was attacked by a dog, who tore away half an ear and much of his right rump.

Without medical attention, he would have died from the infection, but at this point South Lantau's network of animal lovers stepped in.

Helen Chan, of Shui Hau, was walking her dog when she saw Billy near the Ma Po

Peng prison at Tong Fuk and called Dina Yang, who lived nearby.

Dina tracked Billy down to the prison, where warders showed her where Billy was hiding with his wounds. The prison officers had even "kind of patched him up with bandages over the ears and butt," Dina recalled.

But she had to move quickly. The warders had called the Agriculture, Fisheries & Conservation Department (AFCD), under whose 'harm minimisation' policy severely and sometimes not-so-severely injured animals are routinely put to sleep.

"I knew that would be a death sentence," Dina said. She assured the warders she was taking Billy to the vet and they allowed her to drive into the prison to collect him. She delivered the injured calf to Pui O vet Dr Joe Laraya, known to everyone as Dr Joe.

Dr Joe's partner Okka Scherer, well known for her work in rescuing stray dogs, told *Life on Lantau* that Billy had a big hole in his rump which would need daily cleaning to ensure it did not get infested with maggots. Plus, she added, "if we put him out the same thing would happen again. He had no mum to protect him."

Which meant Billy was going to have to stay in the human universe for a while. Okka and Dr Joe built an enclosure for

him in their garden and for much of the next year that was where he stayed. They began buying hay from the Jockey Club to feed Billy, but that wasn't cheap. So Okka started walking him for two hours every day so he could eat some grass.

That was Billy's first encounter with Pui O's Asian water buffalo. "We discovered that the buffalo didn't mind him, and he enjoyed playing with the buffalo," Okka said.



But Billy also spent a good deal of time at other people's homes. Mel Potgieter, the organiser of the Lantau International Beer Dash, looked after Billy for several months.

When he arrived he had such serious injuries, "I could put my fist through the hole in his leg," she said. Billy grazed on Mel's lawn, and occasionally on her neighbours' as well, and as he recovered from his injuries, his distinctive persona emerged.

Locked up with Mel's staffordshire terriers, Billy decided he was one of them. "I started feeding them inside because he used to push them out of the way of their food," Mel said. "Then at feeding time he would try to put his head through the dog flap."

He was also keen to be part of the family. "He would come inside any time he could. If my littlest girl opened the door, he would push her aside and come in. When his horns were growing his favourite thing was rubbing his horns against your bum because they were itchy. He still loves it when you rub under his chin."

Mel and her family would walk Billy daily around Pui O and Ham Tin.

If there was a buffalo in the field, he would try to challenge it. The smaller buffalo would get scared off after a while.

Okka has a similar recollection. He never any serious problems with the buffalo, she says. "Some times he was a bit stupid trying to challenge the big males. He learnt that was not a good idea."

But as Billy grew older, Okka found it increasingly difficult to get him back



home. Sometimes she would have to call on her helpers to pull him back on the rope. What to do with the fully-grown Billy?

Okka didn't want to put him back in Tong Fuk or anywhere close to traffic. "I would have liked to put him into the Mui Wo herd, but the villagers were saying they didn't want any more cattle there."

In the end Billy solved the problem himself. One day early last year, Okka "got so fed up" trying to pull him back home she said, "OK, you do what you want."

So he became a part of the Pui O buffalo herd. There's no question they accept him. Mel observes that when they are harassed by dogs they will protect him equally.

Okka says she still sees Billy almost every morning. "He comes up and you can pat him. We call him and he looks up. If he is with friends, of course he doesn't have any time for us."

Many others keep a close eye on him, such as Jean Hui, Ham Tin's resident buffalo carer, and Anne, who keeps the kiosk next to Pui O beach.

Dina Yang, who also teaches at Ark Eden, brings classes to Pui O to meet Billy. "He's always a great case study and they're always really excited about him."

Not just children. Back at the picnic site, the tourists have stopped throwing sand at him. Now that they've heard his story they're calling him by name.

It seems humans respond to Billy's social intelligence, his ability to cross boundaries and the way he has been accepted by buffalo. He's a lesson for all of us.



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