

# Hong Kong's identity crisis

By Ben Bland

Kelvin Lee should have been a posterchild for the integration of Hong Kong and China. Born in 1990, the Hong Konger's father gave him a Chinese name incorporating the word "hope", reflecting a belief that the handover of the British colony to China in 1997 would improve life on both sides of the border.

Mr Lee grew up with a love of Chinese history and culture, and used to work as an insurance broker for one of the many mainland companies that have been expanding in Hong Kong. But China's increasing squeeze on Hong Kong's autonomy, freedoms and way of life turned him from apolitical finance worker to activist.

"I still think Chinese culture is very beautiful but we are Hong Kong people who live in Hong Kong so we have to keep our own culture," says Mr Lee, who recently quit his insurance job to work as a community organiser. "People want independence so they won't have to be afraid about the influence of the Chinese government."

The moment of transformation for him, as for tens of thousands of others, came on September 28 2014, when the Hong Kong police fired tear gas at thousands of students and other demonstrators gathering at the start of the pro-democracy Occupy Central protests.

"That day was really remarkable for me," he says. "I saw the tear gas explode in front of me more than 20 times and saw how frightened people were."

Occupy - also known as the Umbrella revolution after the umbrellas used to fend off police pepper spray - failed in its mission to secure full democracy from Beijing. But it cemented the sense of a separate Hong Kong identity, and set many young Hong Kongers on a collision course with the world's most powerful authoritarian state.

Chinese President Xi Jinping arrives in Hong Kong today to cap a months-long, USD82-million extravaganza to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the return of the former British colony to China. But while the official commemoration slogan is "Together, Progress, Opportunity", many young Hong Kongers feel their city is defined more by division, stagnation and crisis.

The Chinese government is aghast at the growing support for separatism in Hong Kong. It has called on the Hong Kong government to enact national security legislation and threatened to further curb the territory's freedoms.

"The Chinese government is imposing a harder and harder line on Hong Kong and I feel a sense of desperation," says Agnes Chow, a 20-year-old student who formed a political party with other Occupy activists



Pro-independence activists holding the Hong Kong flags from when it was still a British colony and a yellow umbrella, symbol of the 2014 students' street protest, march with other pro-democracy activists

and helped a friend, Nathan Law, win election to Hong Kong's partially democratic Legislative Council in September. "But our message to Xi is simple: we are not going to give up the fight for democracy and basic dignity, even if the Chinese government is trying to suppress our movement."

While Hong Kong is racked by divisions, people on both sides agree that the semi-autonomous territory is stuck in a deep rut.

"If our society continues to be heavily divided, we can't even make progress on economic and livelihood issues," says Holden Chow, a pro-Beijing politician, who recalls returning excitedly from Uppingham, his elite English boarding school, to watch the 1997 handover ceremony on July 1. "That's the sad reality."

Hong Kong is facing a slew of intractable and inter-linked problems. Sky-high housing prices have left many unable to afford even a tiny apartment in this city of 7.4 million people, a problem exacerbated by money surging in from the mainland. At the same time, the powerful grip of a small group of well-connected tycoons stifles opportunities and widens inequality. Bitter political divisions over the relationship with Beijing have left the government incapable of tackling such socio-economic challenges.

Beijing has intensified its interventions, defying its commitments in Hong Kong's mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law. Chinese agents were behind the 2015 kid-

napping of five booksellers who sold works critical of the government, as well as an influential billionaire this year, promoting a climate of fear and self-censorship. Chinese officials have also meddled more in local politics.

The deepening conflict bodes ill for Hong Kong's status as an open, thriving global city. It also undermines Beijing's hopes to convince self-governing Taiwan that "One Country, Two Systems" - the idea championed by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s to reintegrate Hong Kong and Taiwan - is a model to follow.

"People should look at Hong Kong as a test case as to whether you can trust China," says Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, who oversaw the handover. "It's perfectly clear that China has started to step over the line."

The growing sense of youth frustration in Hong Kong is often attributed to the high cost of living and Beijing's deepening crackdown. But there is another factor at play: identity.

Lau Ming-wai, a 36-year-old second-generation property tycoon and the head of the government's youth commission, is a rare member of the establishment who is willing to talk critically about China's struggle to win hearts and minds in Hong Kong. He says those who came of age after the handover grew up in an "identity vacuum", with little attachment either to Hong Kong's colonial heritage or mainland China.

Chinese officials and their Hong Kong counterparts belatedly tried to

promote "One Country" over "Two Systems" but their heavy-handed efforts backfired.

In 2012, they planned to implement mandatory courses in "moral and national education" that would have taught Hong Kongers that rule by the Chinese Communist party was "progressive and selfless" and "superior" to western democracy.

Derided as brainwashing, the proposal sparked a movement called Scholarism, which roused teenagers like Ms Chow and her friend (and, later, Occupy leader) Joshua Wong to swap computer games and manga comics for loudspeakers and protest banners.

"Our young people aren't stupid," says Mr Lau. "We, Hong Kong Joe Public, receive information at a frequency and channel much closer to the western than the Chinese style. So when you broadcast information using the China frequency, we don't receive much of it."

Young Hong Kongers across the political spectrum say their "core values" such as respect for freedom and democracy make them different from the 1.4 billion mainlanders who live across the Shenzhen river.

But many find it difficult to define what it means to be a Hong Konger, beyond not being a mainland.

"I have a Hong Kong identity card but the true meaning is really hard to explain," says Jodi Lam, a 23-year-old sociology student. "We treasure integrity, equality, democracy and freedom, all those things China

doesn't have."

She says that when she was in primary school she felt like a "Chinese with a Hong Kong passport". But today her sense of Chinese nationality has weakened, as with many other young people.

The proportion of 18-29-year-olds who describe their ethnic identity as "broadly" Chinese has dropped from 32 percent just after the handover to only 3 percent this year, according to a survey by the public opinion programme at the University of Hong Kong. Over the same period, the proportion of that same age group describing their broad identity as "Hong Konger" has jumped from 68 percent to 94 percent.

While some say they simply want to protect Hong Kong's way of life, an increasing number are calling for a referendum on the territory's future or even outright independence.

Baggio Leung, 30, has been at the forefront of this movement. "If our government is not elected by the people and doesn't protect the people, where is their legitimacy?" he says.

Like Kelvin Lee and many others, Mr Leung was inspired to take action by the Occupy movement, quitting his comfortable job as a digital marketer to run for - and win election to - the Legislative Council in September. He was one of six candidates under 40 who were elected after calling for independence or self-determination, views that won the backing of around 20 percent of voters in a result that shocked Beijing.

## Hong Kong's identity crisis (continued)



But Mr Leung's formal political career was shortlived. He and a colleague from his Youngspiration party were ejected from the council by a High Court judge for insulting China and holding up a banner that read "Hong Kong is not China" during their oath-taking ceremony. The verdict came a week after China's parliament - which has ultimate authority over Hong Kong - ruled that anyone promoting separatism in Hong Kong be barred from public office.

Now the Hong Kong government is trying to oust four more lawmakers, including Nathan Law, Ms Chow's friend and Hong Kong's youngest ever legislator at just 23, on similar grounds.

Brian Fong, a professor at the Education University of Hong Kong, argues that Beijing's efforts to exert stronger influence over Hong Kong continue to be counterproductive. He compares the situation to Catalonia, where the hard line taken by the Spanish government against local autonomy has spurred the growth of "peripheral nationalism".

"This is a counter-mobilisation against the centralism of Beijing," he says, citing a recent poll finding that 60 percent of Hong Kongers feel that their autonomy is under attack from China.

The emerging Hong Kong identity is both threatened and reinforced by Beijing's encroachments. This has left moderates and supporters of integration fearful for the future.

Gary Wong, a 34-year-old corporate executive, has tried - and failed - to convince the radicals and government supporters that the solution for Hong Kong lies in the political centre ground.

He says the dysfunction in Hong Kong is damaging the city's economic prospects. Some of his most talented friends have considered emigration, while many young Hong Kongers reject the opportunities offered by China. But his moderate Path of Democracy party performed poorly in September's election.

"I'm worried about the new generation," he says. "The more I travel to China, the more I see rapid growth in technology and the quality of human capital. I think we are lagging behind."

Carrie Lam, a career civil servant who was sworn in as Hong Kong's chief executive by Mr Xi on Saturday, has pledged to tackle youth alienation. Her policies include promoting "patriotic" education and generating job opportunities by further integrating Hong Kong into the thriving economy of neighbouring Guangdong province.

## A recent poll found 60 percent of Hong Kongers feel that their autonomy is under attack from China

But Alex Fan, a 29-year-old barrister and member of the government's youth commission, warns that these ideas will only succeed if young Hong Kongers accept them.

Mr Fan, who calls himself a proud Chinese first and a Hong Konger second, stresses that One Country, Two Systems will not work unless there is "mutual trust" between Beijing, the Hong Kong government and the territory's people.

For Mr Xi and Communist party loyalists, the handover symbolised the righting of one of many wrongs against China: the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain in 1842 after its loss in the First Opium War.

But in worrying too much about winning the past, they risk losing the support of young Hong Kongers who fear China's growing clout.

"China is like the biological mother you recently reunited with," says Dawn Leung, a 21-year-old journalism student. "There's no love at all."

Additional reporting by  
Nicole Liu

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PERSON IN THE NEWS | DANIEL LOEB

# Revival of a master of the universe

By Lindsay Fortado\*

At a lavish annual hedge fund conference in Las Vegas that attracts some of the biggest players in the industry, a familiar name was on the agenda earlier this year. But unlike in previous years, this time there was a stipulation: Daniel Loeb would be speaking off the record.

Mr Loeb, the 55-year-old sharp-tongued activist investor and founder of Third Point, is not usually one to censor himself. Two years earlier, at the same conference, he took a swipe at Warren Buffett for the "wide disconnect" between what he practices and preaches regarding hedge funds.

He has sued Sotheby's, the auction house, helped oust the chief executive of Yahoo and publicly targeted companies ranging from Dow Chemical to Sony. But Mr Loeb's latest investment, a stake in Nestlé worth about USD3.5 billion, reflects the more tempered persona that the once-fiery investor has adopted of late. There were no angry letters to the board or demands for inept management to step down. The stake was announced in a letter to Third Point investors earlier this week with a list of requests: the Swiss food group should sell its remaining 23 percent shareholding in L'Oréal; boost its debt to buy back shares; and set a formal profit margin target of 18 to 20 percent by 2020. Many of those may have already been set in train by Nestlé chief executive Mark Schneider, who is still in his first year in the role and is working on plans to revamp the conglomerate.

Mr Loeb, a health buff and yoga fanatic who often retweets the Dalai Lama's inspirational quotes, has not necessarily chilled out in the third decade of his fund's operation. Yet activism has changed as the strategy has grown commonplace. Boards are more willing to engage, so the public foot-stomping by some activists has faded, while institutional investors are more ready to vote in line with activists, and even to court them.

While Mr Loeb and investors such as Carl Icahn and Bill Ackman championed public battles with companies, a group of funds, including Europe's Cevian Capital and San Francisco-based ValueAct, employed a "constructivist" style of activism, where they sought to engage management behind the scenes in the hopes of driving change that way. It's an approach Mr Loeb is increasingly adopting - and one that is more commonly deployed in Europe, a region he and other



activists have in their sights.

But the Nestlé stake is also the largest investment Mr Loeb has ever made, and shows that even multinational conglomerates are not immune to being targeted by activist shareholders. Third Point, which manages \$18 billion, raised another \$1 billion in a special purpose vehicle to purchase the stake.

Activism has been experiencing a resurgence in the past year after the high-profile struggles of Valeant, a US drugmaker whose shares plunged after it was targeted by activists, and Bill Ackman's ill-fated campaign against Herbalife had led some investors to go sour on the strategy.

Mr Loeb, too, has been making a comeback. After his fund returned more than 20 percent in 2012 and 2013, returns fell to 5.7 percent in 2014 and were down 1.4 percent in 2015 and returned 6.1 percent last year. But Third Point's master fund was up 10 percent at the end of May and assets have returned to a previous peak of \$18 billion.

Mr Loeb, who is estimated to be worth about \$2.9 billion, started his fund in 1995 in the weight room of David Tepper, the founder of the hedge fund Appaloosa Management, with a desk he found on the side of the road and a few million he raised from family and friends.

Born in 1961 in Santa Monica, California, to a high-powered lawyer and a historian, Mr Loeb always seemed to have an entrepreneurial streak. In high school, he started a skateboard company called "B Industries". He attended the University of California at Berkeley before graduating from

Columbia University in New York with a degree in economics. He cycled through jobs in finance over a decade from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, first at the private equity firm Warburg Pincus, then in corporate development at the record label Island Records, and later at Jefferies and Citigroup.

In the pantheon of masters of the universe, Mr Loeb is one of the more colourful - an avid surfer who has cited the rapper Tupac in his investment letters and once challenged a group of former navy SEALs to a half iron triathlon to raise money for charity. When Third Point celebrated its 20-year anniversary in 2015, its invitation letters featured a younger Mr Loeb on the cover of a fake rap album entitled "2 Legit 2 Quit".

With the Nestlé stake, Mr Loeb has also shown his readiness to tackle Europe as opportunities in the US dwindle. People close to Third Point say the fund is increasingly looking towards the continent as the eurozone stabilises following the election of Emmanuel Macron in France.

But Mr Loeb has been burnt before when wandering into new territory - for example in Japan, where he targeted Sony, proposing that the company split in two. But Sony did not heed his demands and the share price continued to fall. Nevertheless, Third Point sold the stake at a profit in late 2014.

\*The writer is the FT's hedge fund correspondent

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By Eric Lam

# Hong Kong versus Singapore: which city is better for expats?

**I**N the race to lure talent for global firms' regional headquarters, Hong Kong and Singapore have long been neck-and-neck. While many companies make their managers locate in one or the other city — often depending on whether their duties focus more on Southeast Asia, or on China — others give top talent a choice.

Back before Hong Kong's handover to Chinese rule in 1997, Hong Kong had an edge due to expectations of the opening of China's economy, the city's role as the entrepot on the border, and the banking industry poised to capitalize on it. Now, Singapore's push into innovation and technology has the Lion City on an upswing, said Karen Koh of recruiting and consultancy firm HRnetOne, who works in the Singapore-based company's Hong Kong office.

"Twenty years ago, Hong Kong was a more popular expat destination than Singapore because of the job opportunities or perception that banking was much hotter in Hong Kong," she said. "I don't think banking will ever be able to compare with Hong Kong, but other sectors in Singapore have come up."

For expatriates considering which city to choose, here's the ultimate Hong Kong versus Singapore guide, with prices converted to U.S. dollars:

## 1. FIRST THINGS FIRST: YOUR SALARY

**The top salaries in Hong Kong for jobs in the financial industry are about 25 percent higher than in Singapore on average, according to data compiled by Bloomberg from the 2017 salary survey of recruitment firm Robert Walters Plc. That trend carries across most industries.**

Personal income taxes in the two cities are relatively low. The top rate in Singapore for income above the first USD230,500 is 22 percent; in Hong Kong, the top rate is 17 percent.

## 2. WHAT YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY ON

Those extra dollars don't necessarily get you as far in Hong Kong, however. The city has overtaken Tokyo as the most expensive in the region and second overall in the world for expatriates, behind only Angola's capital Luanda, according to the latest cost of living survey from consultancy firm ECA International. Singapore, by contrast, is 24th on its list.

The survey tracks the cost of goods ranging from groceries to beer and tobacco, while excluding spending such as rent and school tuition.

Taxes on alcohol mean the price of imbibing is higher in Singapore. A pint of beer in a Singaporean pub goes for about \$9, while the same will set you back \$7.70 in Hong Kong, according to Deutsche Bank AG's 2017 report on global consumer prices using data gathered from Expatistan.com, which com-



Hong Kong



Singapore

pires input from thousands of people reporting the prices they pay in various countries.

The bank's Bad Habits Index, which combines the price of five beers and two packs of cigarettes — also heavily taxed — has Singapore ahead, at \$64.30. In Hong Kong, it's \$53.50.

The foodie expatriate may be interested to know: Hong Kong boasts 61 Michelin-starred restaurants, including six with three stars. Singapore has 29, with its Joel Robuchon outpost the only 3-star establishment.

## For those paying their own rent, Hong Kong is more expensive than Singapore by a huge margin

## 3. HOW MUCH YOU'LL PAY FOR HOUSING

For most people, the single biggest cost, though, is housing — unless companies still offer housing packages, which have been increasingly dwindling.

Expatriate packages for both cities have been sliding for the past five years, down 2 percent to \$265,500 in Hong Kong and 6 percent to \$235,500 in Singapore, according to ECA's MyExpatriate Market Pay survey. While salaries have risen in Singapore in the same period, the decline in benefits has reduced the total package value, according to Lee Quane, ECA's regional director for Asia.

"The cost of housing in Hong Kong is obviously higher than it is in Singapore," said Quane in a phone interview. "Companies obviously have to reflect that in the person's salary by either providing a higher housing allowance to the expatriates in Hong Kong or bumping up the employee's salary."

For those paying their own rent,

Hong Kong is more expensive than Singapore by a huge margin.

Overall, rent in Hong Kong is 47 percent more expensive, according to June data from Expatistan.com. Monthly rent for a 900-square-foot furnished residence in an expensive area costs about \$2,600 in Singapore, while the equivalent in Hong Kong costs almost \$4,900, the site said.

"The housing cost is the biggest downside for Hong Kong right now," said Patrick Groth, Asia regional director for relocation company Crown World Mobility. "That's a big disadvantage because you get much, much more for your money in Singapore."

## 4. DOING BUSINESS AND INVESTING MONEY

Those looking to park their cash in local investments have done better in Hong Kong over the years. Real estate investors have seen secondary home prices soar 400 percent since the last property slump in 2003. Hong Kong's stock market has beaten Singapore's over the past five years, too.

International companies based in Hong Kong rose 53 percent since 1997, totaling almost 1,400 as of last year, according to government data. Singapore, which tracks total investment by foreign companies, recorded a 12 percent decline in the 2011-2015 period, with U.S. companies the only ones to increase their presence.

Yet Singapore beats Hong Kong as a more attractive destination price-wise for companies, according to a report last year from DTZ/Cushman & Wakefield. Hong Kong suffers from higher costs, while Singapore boasts cheaper office rent — about half the price on a per square meter basis, the report said. Singapore ranks No. 2 in Asia, behind South Korea, and No. 6 in the world on the Bloomberg Innovation Index.

For those starting their own businesses, Singapore also ranks No. 2 in the world — after New Zealand — for how easy it is to get off the ground and through regulatory hoops, according to the World Bank's latest ranking. Hong Kong

ranks No. 4, up one place from a year before.

## 5. THE PRICE OF GETTING A CAR ON THE ROAD

Singapore is possibly the most expensive place in the world to drive, due to regulations and fees designed to keep traffic from turning into the chaos that befell Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok and other Southeast Asian cities as incomes rose and more residents could afford to get behind the wheel.

Drivers must bid for a limited number of special permits, as well as pay a slew of taxes and recurring fees that can more than double the cost of car ownership.

An Audi A6 luxury sedan costs, all-in, about \$70,400 in Hong Kong, based on manufacturers' suggested pricing, which includes a First Registration Tax, annual fees and insurance. In Singapore, the car would cost about \$168,100 based on quoted prices from authorized distributors, according to the government's vehicle registration website.

Taxis are relatively cheap, however: An 8 kilometer taxi ride will set you back about \$8 in both Singapore and Hong Kong, according to Expatistan data. That compares with \$22 in London and \$15 in New York, the data show.

## 6. POLLUTION AND THE AIR THAT YOU BREATHE

Hong Kong became notorious for its high levels of air pollution, so the government began enacting curbs on emissions — from vehicles and heavy cargo ships using its port — as well as cooperating with officials in Guangdong province to try to reduce smog blowing across the border.

These measures have shown results. Since 1999 Hong Kong has curbed roadside levels of nitrogen oxides by 56 percent, and fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, by 52 percent, according to 2016 government data.

Singapore, despite stringent vehicle emissions standards, is occasionally plagued by trouble from across its border as well: haze from Indonesian wildfires. The city suf-

fered from another spike in 2016.

Singapore reported good or moderate air quality for 87.5 percent of the year in 2015. That's lower than the 97 percent of the previous year, due to the wildfires. Hong Kong reported 247 clean air days, for 67 percent of 2016, according to data compiled by Bloomberg based on the city's air quality index.

## 7. EDUCATING AND TAKING CARE OF THE KIDS

The cost of private school rivals rent as the biggest cost in each city. Tuition for a new middle-school student at Singapore American School costs about \$36,200 if the student comes from a non-American family. At the American School Hong Kong, a similar new student entering grades 7 or 8 will need to pay about \$25,200, including the entry fee, plus either a recurring annual fee of \$2,600 or a refundable debenture of \$77,000. It's also difficult to get a spot in a number of Hong Kong schools.

"As soon as we knew that we were moving to Hong Kong, one of our most immediate thoughts was: Start applying for schools now because it is so competitive," said Adam Johnston, managing director with Robert Half Hong Kong Ltd., a unit of staffing firm Robert Half International Inc. and father of 1- and 3-year-old kids.

Yet Singapore's secondary schools beat Hong Kong's in the global Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, ratings. Singapore ranks at the top for math, reading and science. Hong Kong is No. 2 in reading and math, but fell to No. 9 in science in the latest test.

Most young families will also hire a domestic worker to help out. Minimum wage for such workers in Hong Kong is currently about \$550 a month, according to the government. Food, health-care and other costs are additional. In Singapore, wages for Filipino maids and nannies are mandated by the Philippine government. As of last year, they were the equivalent of \$400 a month. **Bloomberg**

# Looters strip Greek mountains of wild tea, rare plants

By Costas Kantouris

In the rugged, herb-scented mountains of northwestern Greece, where the border with Albania is a snaking invisible line, trouble is brewing over tea — the wild herbal variety.

Greek authorities and conservationists say bands of impoverished Albanians are making regular cross-border forays, illegally harvesting donkey-loads of herbs and medicinal plants. They mostly pick mountain tea — also called ironwort — hawthorn and even primrose, but they are also destroying rare and endangered species in the process.

The looters then sell the herbs for export to pharmaceutical or cosmetics companies, a business that nets Albanian wholesalers tens of millions annually.

It's illegal in Greece to pick more than a tiny quantity of wild herbs for personal use in traditional infusions. That ban doesn't exist in Albania, one of Europe's poorest nations. But, more significantly, the plants are usually uprooted in the looters' haste to pick as much as possible and be off undetected. This stops natural regeneration, threatens delicate ecosystems and leaves entire mountainsides denuded.

Albanians contend the herbs are there and the Greeks don't pick them, so why shouldn't somebody profit?

Christos Toskos, an environmen-



Bunches of mountain tea are on sale in a shop in Athens

talist in Greece's Kastoria border area, says the depredations have increased over the past five years, with incursions now coming on a daily basis.

"There is very large destruction in areas covering thousands of acres," he said.

Vassilis Filiadis, who grows his own herbs in Kastoria, lamented the fate of an old wild ironwort patch in the Grammos mountains.

"It covers about 3 square kilometers. In past years, the mountain tea grew there like a sea. The plants formed waves," he told The Associated Press. "I went this year and was shocked, it's all been uprooted."

Greece's flora is among the richest in Europe, with about 6,500 native plant species.

In targeted operations over the last few months, Greek police have arrested at least ten Albanians and seized dozens of kilograms of herbs. In one case in late June, three people were caught with 136 kilograms of ironwort loaded on two horses and a donkey.

Albanian exporters pay illegal gatherers up to 6 euros (\$6.80) a kilogram for ironwort and 7 euros a kilogram for hawthorn, Greek officials say.

"They illegally enter Greece and quickly gather the plants to avoid being seen," said Brigadier-Gen-

eral Panagiotis Ntziovaras, head of police for the border region of western Macedonia.

Those caught have been given suspended prison sentences of one or two months and been deported.

Many poor Albanians are crossing the mountains into Greece this year because of an herb shortage in Albania due to freezing temperatures last winter, said Filip Gjoka, president of Albania's Association of Medicinal & Aromatic Plants and owner of an herb and spice trading company.

He said they sometimes take whole families and camp in the mountains with their horses or mules.

"There are a lot of herbs in Greece, where they are not collected due to labor force shortages or lack of interest," Gjoka told the AP. "We here collect those herbs, and these people take the risks to support their families. They can bear a few months of jail since there are no other jobs."

In 2016, 24 Albanian companies exported some 17,000 tons of medicinal and aromatic plants and herbs — 186 varieties — worth a total of USD40 million. They process only about 30 percent of that amount in five factories and export the rest raw.

The U.S. is a main importer, while others include France, Germany, Spain and even Australia.

Kastoria agriculturalist Dimitris Natos said the international market for herbs, particularly for use in cosmetics and foods, is expanding rapidly.

"Annual turnover growth is in the double digits, at around 15 percent," he said.

Gjoka said the Albanian companies employ 10,000 workers and another 80,000 people as independent contractors for whom seasonal herb picking is their only source of income.

Eleni Maloupa, director of Greece's Institute of Breeding and Plant Genetic Resources in Thessaloniki, says some of the 14 kinds of ironwort that grow in Greece are threatened with extinction and there is a blanket ban on their collection, even in small quantities.

She said Greek and Albanian authorities should cooperate to solve the problem, as Greece has already done with neighboring Macedonia.

"The increased arrests may perhaps discourage [illegal harvesters] but I believe we should use all available means, such as drones or cameras, to control the border and illegal plant picking," she said. AP

## ASK THE VET

by Dr Ruan Du Toit Bester



## CANINE GERIATRIC VESTIBULAR DISEASE SYMPTOMS

Vestibular disease in dogs is rare, but may be a devastating condition. The vestibular system is in charge of coordinating the dog's movement and allows him to keep his balance and not get dizzy even after circling the room several times. The vestibular system is rooted in the dog's inner ear and communicates with the dog's brain giving the dog orientation skills. If the dog has vestibular disease, the symptoms will include staggering, lack of balance, uncoordinated eye and head movement. The symptoms may be mistaken for a stroke or a seizure, but the vet can give a proper diagnostics.

### Symptoms of Geriatric Vestibular Disease

When the dog has vestibular disease the communication between the inner ear nerves and the brain is defective. The typical symptoms of geriatric vestibular disease will include:

- Head tilting, similar to the symptoms of ear mite infection
- Irregular eye movement (up-down, from side to side)
- Strabismus

- Dizziness; the dog will look disoriented
- Sudden collapse
- Frequent vomiting
- Staggering gait
- Lack of appetite
- Excessive salivation
- Rolling from side to side
- Difficulty standing up

Some of these symptoms can point to a stroke or a seizure, but a seizure's duration is up to 5 minutes, while the dog with vestibular will display some of these symptoms all day long.

### Causes of Canine Vestibular Disease

The symptoms of vestibular disease can be frightening and you should get to the vet as soon as possible. Even if the geriatric vestibular disease is not as severe as a stroke or a seizure, the disease should be given proper attention. Typically, vestibular disease is caused by a problem in the dog's inner ear (peripheral vestibular disease). However, the problem may also originate in the brain (central vestibular disease).

Some of the most common causes of geriatric

vestibular disease include:

- Ear Infections; if the infection is severe, it advances from the external ear to the middle ear and then to the inner ear, where the vestibular system nerves are located
- Hypothyroidism or low thyroid hormone levels
- Toxic medications used in the dog's ear (especially drops containing alcohol)
- Tumors located in the inner ear
- Encephalitis

However, the geriatric vestibular disease may also be idiopathic, so the cause is unknown.

### Treatment for Geriatric Vestibular Disease

When vestibular disease that occurs in senior dogs and the cause is unknown will often resolve itself in a few days up to 1 week without any treatment. But we don't recommend not treating it.

The cause of vestibular disease must be determined to establish the right treatment. If the disease is caused by infections, the vet will prescribe medications to eliminate these in-



fections. Thyroid drugs can also stimulate the production of thyroid hormones. The administration of toxic ear drops must be discontinued.

The vet may also prescribe medication to control the dizziness and the nausea or other symptoms that may be upsetting the dog. Ensure that the dog is in a safe place, without sharp objects or stairs near, to prevent any accidents from happening.

Hope this info helps  
Till next week  
Dr Ruan Bester

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