

# Los Angeles Times

## A rabbit rescue in downtown L.A.

*Officers confiscate bunnies and other animals being illegally sold by sidewalk vendors. The problem is especially bad around holidays.*

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The bunnies sat in stacked cages on the downtown sidewalk. They nibbled on lettuce as passers-by stopped to pet them. How much? A young woman cheerfully named her price. (\$20 is the going rate.)

"No photographs," she said, passing a hand in front of a rabbit as a photographer snapped pictures.

On a sunny Saturday, she scanned the throngs coursing along Maple Avenue toward 12th Street, en route to the Santee Alley shopping bazaar.

Suddenly, she gasped. She and other vendors whisked black garbage bags over the cages, grabbed them and anything else they could carry and scurried off.

In seconds, they were swarmed by half a dozen yellow-shirted Business Improvement District security officers and a Los Angeles police officer. A bucket of turtles ended up dropped in the middle of 12th Street.

Security officer Alondra Alonzo tussled with one vendor, wresting a bag of rabbits from her grip. The vendor, annoyed, walked off with a single rabbit.

"It's 5 months old," said the woman, who identified herself as Stacy Martinez when asked if the animal was unweaned. "They are well taken care of." She handed the caged rabbit to a little girl, who placed it on her lap.

In the weeks before Easter, the illegal bunny trade is booming in downtown Los Angeles. "It's kind of a perennial problem," said Lt. Paul Vernon of the LAPD, especially around holidays.

In Los Angeles, selling anything on the sidewalk is against the law.

Though the sale of animals may not be on an economic par with the selling of counterfeit designer handbags and bootleg DVDs, what makes it particularly egregious to animal rescuers, the Department of Animal Services and law enforcement officers is that the animals are usually unweaned, malnourished and destined to die once buyers get them home.

An arrest for illegal sidewalk selling brings a citation. But if an animal control officer can certify that the animals are being badly kept, the vendor can be arrested on suspicion of felony animal cruelty.

Two weeks ago, LAPD Officer Matthew Shafer arrested a man downtown on suspicion of animal cruelty and confiscated more than 100 animals, including rabbits and iguanas. "I try to get them at their point of entry: parking lots," Shafer said.

Earlier Saturday, Shafer, downtown security officers and rabbit rescuers had set out to a rooftop parking lot. There, in an unlocked Chevy van, they found a container full of dozens of green turtles clambering over one another.

"For these people, this is just a business," said Shafer.

Shafer, who owns three rescue dogs, said collaring sidewalk vendors illegally selling DVDs and animals is "my favorite thing."

"I know all the players down here," he said. And they know the tall, hazel-eyed cop. They have nicknamed him Guero -- a not-so-endearing term for "white boy."

The vendors rely on lookouts -- on foot, scooters and bicycles -- to warn them by cellphone, walkie-talkie or air horn that officers are approaching, he said.

But on this Saturday, that didn't stop Shafer from arresting a vendor who gave her name as Veronica Maldonado. As she stood by, handcuffed, rabbit rescuer Lejla Hadzimuratovic cradled two tiny bunnies, just days old, their eyes unopened. She will take all the underage rabbits home and nurse them with kitten formula and colostrum pills. (By the way, she said, lettuce destroys the systems of young rabbits.)

"They might survive," she said of her charges.