

Volunteering with Sun Bears in Cambodia

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by Donna Barlow

Ursidae Helarctos malayanus, the Malaysian Sun Bear. This magnificent little bear is found in several countries throughout Asia and can lay claim to being the smallest bear species in the world.

Not a great deal is known about the Sun Bear. In the wild they tend to live a rather reclusive existence away from human populations.

What we do know, however, is that they have been mercilessly hunted for centuries. They are hunted for their meat and fur, for use in traditional medicines, for the exotic pet trade and trade in body parts – e.g. bear paw soup.

I first became aware of the plight of the Sun Bear in Asia a couple of years back while working at Matang Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Borneo. Matang have eight Sun

Bears in residence and the longer I was there, the more captivated I became, spending many hours at the bear enclosure observing, photographing, and returning home eager to learn more about the species.

Sun Bears are listed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species. Fortunately, there are a number of NGO's worldwide, working towards improving the long-term outlook of these bears and other bear species inhabiting the Asian continent.

One such NGO is the Australian organisation Free the Bears Fund Inc. The fund was formed in 1993 by Mary Hutton, whom after watching a local current affairs program on television, made a decision that would change her life along with the lives of her family and friends.

The current affairs segment contained horrific footage of Asiatic Black Bears being milked for bile. Gall bladders have been used in Asian medicine for centuries; however bear bile farming is a relatively new procedure whereby, instead of producing only one gall bladder from a bear carcass, the bear can be milked of its bile for its entire adult life.

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This sickening and unnecessary practice continues today, unchecked by authorities in countries such as China, Vietnam, and Laos where thousands upon thousands of bears are kept in appalling conditions, subjected to pain and suffering for the duration of their entire life.

Nowadays, Free the Bears Fund is active in several countries in South East Asia including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Their work involves not only the conservation of Asiatic black bears, but also Sloth bears and the gorgeous little Sun bear.

In Cambodia, 40 kilometres south of Phnom Penh, you will find Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre. This rescue centre was set up by the government in 1995 but also serves as Cambodia's primary zoological collection.

Phnom Tamao comprises 2,500 hectares of protected forest and of this approximately 1,200 hectares has been set aside by the For-





estry Administration for wildlife rescue. It is here that Free the Bears Fund has been allocated 9 hectares to operate their Cambodian sanctuary for Sun Bears and Asiatic Bears.

The fund currently supports 21 large forested enclosures and a nursery for orphaned bear cubs. Altogether providing a safe haven for 113 bears: 78 Sun Bears, 34 Asiatic Bears and 1 hybrid.

Once I discovered that Free the Bears Fund also manage a successful volunteer program at Phnom Tamao, I was keen to participate, so set about organising some other like minded volunteers to form a group trip.

The volunteer program at Phnom Tamao can accommodate up to six volunteers at any one time. Participation is for a minimum of two weeks and can be up to eight weeks. Our small New Zealand contingent of six arrived in Phnom Penh on the 2nd April excited about being able to work closely with the bears over the subsequent two weeks.

Volunteer accommodation is a modern two level house on the outskirts of Samranjoven village. Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre and Zoological Park is about 20 minutes

drive away and volunteers are transported there each morning at 8am and leave the park at 4pm.

Australian Emma Gatehouse is the Free the Bears Volunteer Coordinator at Phnom Tamao. During induction, Emma went through health & safety procedures, introduced us to the Keepers and the Bears, showed us around the different enclosures and explained the work we would be doing. We also had a brief tour of the Zoological Park.

The park has many other species on display including Leopards, Gaur, Elephants, Lions, Tigers, Samba Deer, Crocodiles, various exotic bird species, several Gibbon species and Dhole (Asiatic Wild Dog) to name but a few.

However our volunteer group was there to help with the bears only, and as time progressed, we discovered that the majority of bears at the sanctuary have been confiscated or voluntarily surrendered; unwanted pets that have grown into unmanageable size and temperament. In Cambodia it is illegal to keep bears as pets but as with all Asian countries, the law is loosely enforced.

Note the sickle-shaped claws that the Bear uses to climb trees

Sadly those larger pets that do not make it to the sanctuary are often sold to restaurants to be made into bear paw soup.

Other bears that are extremely lucky these days to be residing at Phnom Tamao have been rescued from the wildlife trade; live Sun Bears and their body parts are commonly available for sale in most countries in which they inhabit including Cambodia. Skin, meat, bone, paws, lung, heart, liver, intestines, gall bladder and blood are widely used for food and medicine. A “cure all” for anything from skin problems to low blood pressure to lung disease to arthritis to fatigue... the list is endless!

The majority of bears at Phnom Tamao are Sun Bears. After entering the sanctuary they spend their first month in quarantine in order to safeguard against possible disease transmission to other bears.

Very young bears often require expert care around the clock, with their growth rates



and health status closely monitored. Once they are of a suitable age and a little more independent the bears are moved to the quarantine area.

Adult Sun Bears can stand around 70 cm tall and weigh up to 75kg. (Females are slightly smaller). They have a solid body with short dense black fur and a distinct yellow/orange crescent shaped patch on their chest. This patch is sometimes dotted with black spots and can vary in size, shape and colour.

There is no hair on the soles of their feet and sharp sickle shaped claws enable the bears to be excellent climbers. Sun Bears have a very long, slender tongue which aids in the extraction of honey and treats from difficult places. In the wild their diet would consist of fruit, termites, ants, earthworms, small birds and rodents, lizards and insects. The bears vocalise with a short, medium intensity “dog like” bark, so are often referred to by locals as the dog bear.

Sun Bears are noticeably different from their cousin, the Asiatic Black Bear (or Moon Bear) *Ursus thibetanus*. These bears can weigh in at up to 200kg and have much longer fur. They are normally black, but can sometimes be brown and in fact there is a stunningly beautiful reddish/brown Moon Bear at Phnom Tamao called Brandy.

The job of a volunteer is to help with all duties relating to the care and welfare of each and every one of these bears. First thing each morning, after being assigned to a Keeper, volunteers commence daily cleaning and feeding routines. The bears are brought inside for their morning feed and any medication that may be required. While they are locked inside the volunteers and the Keepers do a clean and check of the outside enclosures.

All of the enclosures have climbing towers, platforms, ropes, a plunge pool, and many other structures to keep the bears amused. They are free to roam all day and at night have the choice to stay inside or out, as some night dens are left open for them.

The enclosures are protected by solar powered electric fences. This stops the bears climbing out and escaping. Some young trees are also protected by electric fencing. We pick up all bear poo (there is tons of this!) and spread dog biscuits around. Once a week the pond is emptied, cleaned and filled with

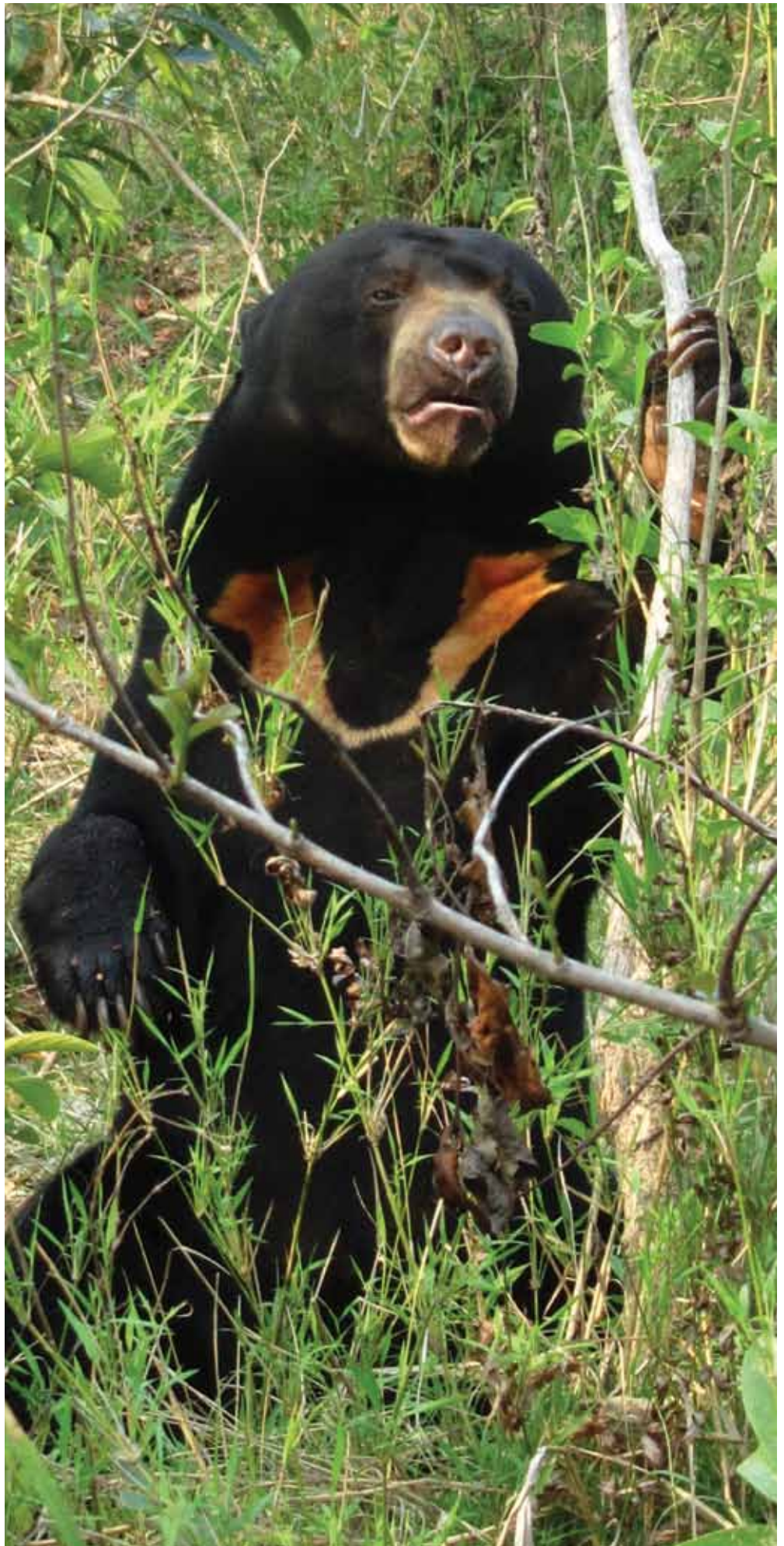
“ *These bears are so beautiful that it is heartbreaking to think that humans could hurt them and treat them so appallingly* ”

fresh water. Inside the bears are munching away on boiled rice, eggs and dog biscuits.

Once the bears are released back outside, the night dens are cleaned. This involves picking up more bear poo, and other rubbish like left over fruit skins. The dens are then hosed down with a high pressure hose, scrubbed with disinfectant, then hosed again. Volunteers also wash all the metal food bowls in dish-washing liquid, rinse them and hang them up to dry.

The morning cleaning routine normally finishes around 10:30 - 10:45am. We then go to the kitchen where the daily food supply is delivered. All food is weighed and recorded. Depending on what is available at the market and the price, the contractor arrives with bananas, melons, turnips, beans, dragon fruit, carrots, tomatoes and rose apples. After the bulk weighing, turnips, apples, carrots, tomatoes and dragon fruit are all chopped up. Melons and banana bunches are counted.

After lunch we return to the kitchen and measure out the food into buckets for the Keepers to collect later on. There is a chart on the wall which tells us how much of each fruit or vegetable goes to each “house” (enclosure). The buckets are all colour coordinated with each house having a different colour. Daily rice allocation is also cooked in the kitchen by one of the Keepers in huge pots over gas fired stoves. The gas used for cooking the rice is Bio-Gas derived from the bear manure. This is an excellent system for re-cycling the endless supply of manure.



This young sapling can easily be broken by a Sun Bear



After the food is organised for the afternoon feeding, we return to the compound. We spend time preparing enrichment, large Kong toys stuffed with dog biscuits, jam, bananas, beans and morning glory. We make up one ball for each bear and the number depends on which house is receiving enrichment that day.

There is normally time for other jobs like painting or making hammocks before returning to our allocated house and Keeper at 3pm to help with the afternoon feed. The bears are once again locked in their night dens so we can safely enter the outside enclosure to place/hide the food and enrichment balls.

It is a thrill to watch the bears race back out of their dens and hunt down the food. The younger ones can be really amusing struggling to get the treats out of pipes, balls and other hiding places.

These bears are so beautiful that it is heart-breaking to think that humans could hurt them and treat them so appallingly. Our

Sun Bears trying to get food out of enrichment balls



final day came around all too quickly, encased with a pang of sadness. It is amazing how easily you become attached to these animals and each one of us had our favourite bear.

An unexpected highlight of our last afternoon was getting introduced to Lola who is currently housed in the quarantine area, but due to be moved into another enclosure very soon.

Lola is now a feisty, healthy 8 month old cub. She was brought to the centre at 2 months old, weighing only 2 kilos, severely ill and not expected to live. Lola was cared for around the clock by FTB staff for weeks, until finally there was a glimmer of hope that she was going to make it. And she did! And what a beautiful little bear she is, just full of personality, mischief and charm. Here is a picture of Lola at the bars of her enclosure posing for photographs.

Free the Bears Fund continues to tirelessly campaign against the cruel practice of bear bile farming, the capture and dismemberment of wild bears for the restaurant trade, and the poaching and illegal trade of various bear species throughout Asia. The volunteer program helps to raise awareness while also



Above, from left to right: Louise Quartley, Arron Dyer, Rochelle Pryde, Emma Gatehouse FTB Volunteer Co-ordinator, Donna Barlow, Joanna Cranness, Darren Cross

Right: Lola was not expected to survive when she first arrived at the rehabilitation centre

giving participants the chance of a lifetime to work alongside these beautiful bears. I highly recommend giving it a go if you can.

Of course our trip to Cambodia was not all work and no play. Weekends were spent sightseeing; it did not take long to decide that Cambodia and Phnom Penh are well worth a visit. If you enjoy travelling to Asian countries, there is still a lot of "old" Asia here, mixed with the new and developing.

The Killing Fields of Choeung Ek Tuol and the Sling Genocide Museum were a pretty sobering experience. Not a place for everyone I guess, but worth visiting if you are interested in understanding a little about the history of Cambodia and its people.

We also flew to Siem Reap and spent a few days exploring Angkor National Park and the spectacular array of Cambodia's Khmer Temples.

For more information on volunteer trips to either Cambodia or Borneo contact Donna Barlow at back_of_beyond.volunteers@xtra.co.nz

