



# Bear rescue in Indochina: turning challenges into triumph

**I**f there was ever an example of how one person can make a huge difference to the plight of animals in need then Mary Hutton is it. All she needed to do was care enough.

In 1995, Mary, an English-born Australian citizen, was watching a television documentary highlighting the plight of Asiatic black bears in China, and was horrified to learn about the practice of bear bile farming and the disgraceful conditions these bears were kept in. Like most people who learn of these practices, Mary was horrified – unlike most other people, however, she was so moved she could not simply turn off the television, but felt she must do something to help.

The following day, Mary stood outside her local supermarket hoping she could spread a little awareness about what she had learned and began collecting a petition of signatures. Little did she know how much this small step would alter her life and the lives of hundreds of Asian bears. Mary's petition and campaign grew over a few months to 150,000 signatures, which she presented to the Chinese Embassy in Australia, and continued on her mission to highlight the cause to anyone who would listen.

One of those who listened was an Australian businessman living in Cambodia who, after having rescued three young Malayan sun bear cubs from their fate of being on the menu of a local restaurant, asked Mary to help find these bears a new home. After months of government negotiations and mountains of paperwork, the seemingly impossible was achieved and the young bears arrived in Sydney to begin their new lives free from hunger, fear and harm. Thus, Free the Bears Fund was born.

Fifteen years later, Free the Bears Fund has grown from a small, Perth-based fundraising group to an internationally respected non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to the protection and

## Denise Laughlin RVN, tells the story of how one woman's sheer determination resulted in huge improvements to Asian bear welfare

preservation of bears. With an on-the-ground presence across Asia, the fund has been instrumental in the rescue and rehabilitation of more than 780 bears. Working in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia and India, Free the Bears Fund works in partnership with local and national government institutions as well as like-minded NGO groups to maximise the impact of their work.

### Bear trade

South-east Asia's two bear species, the sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) and the Asiatic black (or moon) bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), are among the most heavily traded large mammal species in Asia. Due to a rapid growth in wealth, there is a thriving market for bears, which are kept as status symbol pets or sold into the international market for export to neighbouring countries. Bear parts, such as skins, paws, gall bladders and bile, sell for a hefty price on the black market. They are used not only as components of traditional medicines, but also as status symbols, illustrating the power and wealth of the consumer.

Bears are also used to provide entertainment by dancing or posing for photographs with tourists. Bears have been used in traditional medicines for thousands of years, as it is believed they can provide relief from ailments ranging from lethargy to baldness, to impotency and liver disease.

Advances in modern medicine mean the practice of obtaining animal parts is redundant, and multiple synthetic alternatives are available. However, animals are still being hunted and kept captive in horrendous conditions to be milked for bile, killed for meat or have their paws coarsely amputated for soup.

### Raising awareness

Free The Bears Fund strives to educate and raise awareness in order to stamp out wildlife trade and assist local governments in implementing and enforcing new legislation, while rescuing victims of the trade and providing a safe and secure home.

The fund first began working with the Cambodian government in 1997 to develop a sanctuary and provide lifelong care to both bear species. Based at the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre, outside the capital Phnom Penh, the facility cares for 113 rescued bears. Unfortunately, most bears that arrive at the sanctuary are unable to be released due to health issues arising from their time in captivity, such as stunted growth from malnourishment, dental damage inflicted by cap-



Denise qualified from the University of Glasgow's veterinary school in 2004. After several years of work and travel, she volunteered for Free the Bears Fund in Cambodia. To pursue a BSc in animal welfare, she reluctantly resigned, but still helps the fund in any way she can.

DENISE LAUGHLIN

tors, missing limbs as a result of snare trap injuries or they are simply too "humanised" from their time as pets to survive in the wild. These factors, combined with the ongoing depletion of wild habitats from illegal deforestation, make the options for releasing rescued bears limited. Therefore, the fund not only facilitates research into wild populations and habitats, but is committed to providing the highest level of care for

"As bears can live up to 30 years in captivity, high levels of care must be sustained by investing in training local staff and keepers, veterinarians and forest rangers to the highest standards."

those bears that must spend the remainder of their natural lives at the sanctuary. As bears can live up to 30 years in captivity, high levels of care must be sustained by investing in training local staff and keepers, veterinarians and forest rangers to the highest standards.

The Cambodian Bear Sanctuary has grown into one of the largest bear rescue centres in the world, covering a 16-acre site, with six bear houses, 21 naturally forested enclosures, a fully equipped veterinary facility and a visitor education centre. This centre provides an opportunity to reach the 300,000-plus visitors who pass through it each year, educating locals and foreign tourists about the plight of bears across Asia and the efforts to conserve the species in Cambodia. A

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Main: Mary Hutton with a sloth bear. Inset: Denise and Bub.



An Asiatic black bear being milked for bile.

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dedicated team of local keepers and international volunteers works tirelessly to maintain enclosures, provide enrichment (in the form of scattered feeds, honey smears) or bamboo treats to encourage natural foraging behaviours), hand-rear cubs orphaned through poaching, and work with local veterinary teams to assist with treatment at the sanctuary's Cambodian Wildlife Hospital. This was the first wildlife hospital of its kind in the region, and facilities include gaseous anaesthesia, a small laboratory, ultrasound and an x-ray machine.

### Countering bile farming

Following the success of the Cambodian Bear Sanctuary, Free The Bears Fund was approached by Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office, Laos, for assistance in providing care for rescued bears. Due to increased enforcement against illegal trade in neighbouring countries, and using loopholes in the Laos wildlife laws, unscrupulous businessmen have begun establishing bear bile farms to supply the black market. At least five bear bile farms have been established in Laos over the past 10 years and it is estimated that up to 170 bears may now be captive. Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre was developed near Luang Prabang and cares for 23 bears.

Free The Bears Fund is working closely with the Department of Forest Inspection and the Department of Forest Resource Conservation to ensure that no further farms are established and, hopefully, the existing farms will be closed down.

In response to continued calls for help in other countries, Free The Bears works with organisations in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and India – where, after seven years of continuous



From left: Asiatic black bear cubs waiting to be sold; Mary and a sloth bear in India; and with a dancing bear in India.

efforts by a coalition of international groups, the last dancing bear was welcomed into the Agra Bear Rescue facility in December 2009. This marked not only the successful abolition of the dancing sloth bear trade in India, but also the provision of sustainable, alternative livelihoods for the hundreds of Kalandar families previously earning their living through this cruel, centuries-old tradition. Representing a landmark occasion for animal welfare workers across Asia, the end of the dancing bear trade proved that huge feats can be achieved through hard work, determination and the invaluable support of campaigners and fund-raisers across the world.

### Greatest challenge

Vietnam represents the greatest challenge that Free the Bears Fund has faced to date. Following years of negotiations with local governments, Free the Bears Fund entered Vietnam in 2008 and began the long journey to bring about the end of bear farming in the country. In a country where wild populations are believed to have been decimated, traders must look elsewhere to obtain live bears to supply the demand for bear bile. Bear farming is rife across the country and cross-border trafficking of cubs from Cambodia, Laos and China is thriving. Current legislation states that the milking and consumption of bile or other bear parts is illegal; however, the practice continues and up to 4,500 registered – and countless unregistered – bears remain captive in farms awaiting rescue.

Free The Bears Fund is optimistic for the future of these bears and is focusing on the southern provinces of Vietnam, creating a world-class facility in the Mekong Delta, which already houses nine black bears. On completion, this sanctuary will provide a safe home for up to 100 rescued bears and will enable local authorities to enforce Vietnam's wildlife protection laws when bear farmers are found to be acting illegally.

Many challenges lie ahead in rescuing so many bears still trapped in farms and tiny cages across the region, and in securing the future of both Asian bear species. Conservation and welfare organisations in the region are dedicated to working together to overcome each country's unique set of issues and employing a range of strategies, including environmental education, conservation research and strengthened law enforcement to ensure that we achieve our mission to protect, preserve and enrich the lives of these amazing creatures.

- There are many ways to get involved with the work of Free the Bears Fund and to support efforts to protect Asia's bears. Volunteering at the Cambodian Bear Sanctuary offers a fantastic opportunity to learn about caring for more than 100 rescued bears on a daily basis. Discounted rates are



Veterinary training at the Cambodian Wildlife Hospital.



Ty-Ty poses for the camera.

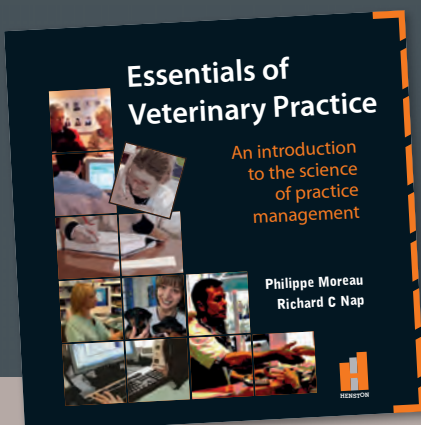


A bear being made to "dance".

available for VNs and vets and wanting to volunteer for at least a week, with special research projects also available for anyone committing to at least three weeks at the sanctuary. ● For further information, visit [www.freethebears.org.au/web/Help-Us/Volunteer-in-Asia/](http://www.freethebears.org.au/web/Help-Us/Volunteer-in-Asia/) or email [freethebearsuk@gmail.com](mailto:freethebearsuk@gmail.com) or telephone 0778 552 856.

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