

RESCUED DANCING BEARS OF INDIA

Raju, the Sloth Bear finally removed from a life of torment.



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Photos: Courtesy of Alan Knight, Chief Executive, International Animal Rescue

Qalandars, a nomadic gypsy tribe date themselves and the origin of the bear dancing back to the 13th century and the pre-Mughal era. Qalandars gained prominence as the royal entertainers in the courts of the Mughal emperors where they also performed magic tricks and staged wrestling bouts. Once the emperors and kingdoms became history, they started to perform 'Bear Dancing' for the general public.

Qalandars purchase the sloth bear cubs from tribal poachers/traders and then train them to dance and respond to commands using the crude tools of pain and fear. At an age of just six months, a crude iron needle is heated and driven through their muzzle and a rough rope is pulled through. This agony of grossly swollen muzzles and torn tissues together with a fair amount of beating and systematic starvation usually teaches the bears who the master is. The bears live the rest of their lives at the end of a four foot long rope and with no stimulation at all, thus causing several mental and stereotypical symptoms.

In December 2009, a Dancing Bear named Raju was brought into a sanctuary in southern India, his rescue made animal welfare history. Saved by a small coalition of international animal rescue groups led by Indian charity Wildlife SOS, Raju was the last remaining dancing bear in India. During the previous seven years, hundreds of dancing bears have been rescued by the Wildlife Coalition. Raju's story is a very sad one and has brought an end to a centuries-old tradition that has inflicted terrible cruelty on thousands of endangered sloth bears. Fortunately, these beloved sloth bears have been given a permanent home in sanctuaries in northern and southern regions of India.

When the bears were brought to the rescue facilities the process of their rehabilitation could begin. Most of them bore severe physical and psychological scars from their lives on the streets and it would take time, patience and expert veterinary care to set them on the road to recovery.

The bears' claws had been cut down to the quick and their teeth smashed off with an iron bar when they were still small cubs, rendering them defenceless against the brutal treatment of their captors. The remaining roots of the teeth would then become inflamed and



infected and excruciatingly painful for the bears. In spite of the agony caused by the festering wounds, they were left untreated by the poor and uneducated Kalandar nomads who used the bears to beg money from tourists.

Relief came in 2005 when a UK dentist took time out from his practice to fly to India and perform pioneering surgery on the abscesses and cavities in the mouths of the rescued bears. Dentist Paul Cassar is a trustee of charity International Animal Rescue (IAR). IAR played a leading role in the rescue of the bears and, with its partners in India, Australia and France, continues to fund their rehabilitation and lifelong care. Paul and veterinary dentist Lisa Milella volunteered their time to carry out root canal treatment and other dental surgery on the bears. They

also trained Indian vets based at the rescue facility so that they would be equipped to treat other bears with similar problems in future.

Alan Knight, IAR's Chief Executive, was at the Agra Bear Rescue Facility (ABRF) when the damage to the bears' mouths was first discovered. He explains: "We had rescued two dancing bears from really grim conditions at a zoo near Goa. After a period of recovery at the sanctuary, we anaesthetised them to remove the rings from the wounds in their noses. While the bears were still under the anaesthetic we examined their mouths and saw the extent of the damage caused by breaking their teeth off at gum level. We all know what agony toothache can be - these bears must have been in terrible pain, not only from the raw wounds in their noses, but also from the mutilation to their teeth and gums."

Paul Cassar went to great lengths to research how best to treat the bears and to acquire the specialist tools for the job. Before leaving on the first trip he said: "I've had to learn a whole new set of skills to prepare for the surgery on the bears and I've been practicing by operating on the mouths of dogs like bull mastiffs which have the closest canine equivalent to the mouth of a sloth bear.

“I’ve also managed to get hold of essential veterinary dental equipment which we have sent over in advance. As an IAR trustee, I’m keenly interested in the charity’s work and I’m delighted at this unique opportunity to make a real difference to the bears by applying my own experience and professional skills.”

The dental surgery has brought about such a marked improvement in the health of the bears that Paul and Lisa continue to travel to India on a regular basis and treat as many bears as they can during each visit.

Now a second opportunity has arisen to improve the quality of life of the rescued bears. As a result of malnutrition or, in some cases, severe beatings and deliberate violent blows to the head, some of the bears are blind or partially sighted. However, eye operations have recently restored the sight of bears in China and International Animal Rescue is hopeful that the same can be done for some of the bears in India. Dr. Claudia Hartley, the ophthalmic veterinary surgeon who has performed the operations, has agreed to travel to India early in 2011 and perform the surgery which could help the blind bears to see again. The ophthalmic treatments could transform the lives of these beautiful animals, helping them to roam and climb much more freely and making an enormous difference to their overall quality of life.

Blind bears need special care to make them feel safe and secure and so they are kept in separate, smaller enclosures where they learn to recognise the familiar landmarks and boundaries. Yet they often remain isolated and detached from their surroundings because of

their disability, which can lead to abnormal behaviour such as pacing and rocking to and fro. They tend to hide away in their dens and need coaxing to come out and explore. In

general the blind bears are much more fearful and it takes them longer to build relationships with their keepers and the other bears.

If their sight can be restored they will be able to behave like the sighted bears, foraging for food and enjoying the full environmental

enrichment items provided to amuse and stimulate them. If the surgery is successful they can be moved into bigger enclosures in the sanctuary where they can roam more freely and more widely. Some of the bears may live for another twenty years. It will transform their lives if their sight can be restored.

The first step will be to make a proper medical assessment of each blind bear. Then Dr. Hartley will determine which type of operation will be most effective in each case. Operations may vary from relatively simple corrective procedures to complex cataract extractions. There are nearly 40 blind bears that could benefit from some form of surgery and potentially have their sight restored.

Surgical procedures carried out on slow lorises at IAR’s primate rehabilitation centre in Indonesia have already benefited from the use of the VetScan VS2 Chemistry analyzer provided by Abaxis: this piece of equipment could undoubtedly prove equally valuable in the ophthalmic treatment on the bears.



For more information about International Animal Rescue, please visit www.internationalanimalrescue.org
