

# Reflections on the Moon Bear Sanctuary

By Suzie Marsh June 2011



Starlight

Doug and I have just returned from China where we went to visit the Moon Bear Rescue Centre owned and run by Animals Asia. We made the trip because I am planning a joint exhibition in 2012 with the wildlife artist Richard Symonds. Our aim is to raise funds for Animals Asia, a charity that we both support and now, as a result of our trip, we are both even more committed to helping them in any way that we can. Our time out there with the Animals Asia founder, Jill Robinson MBE, her staff, the volunteers and, of course, the bears has proved to be a life-changing experience for all of us.

It seemed a very long way to go to see some bears, but I was keen to go and “meet them in the flesh”. It was a too good an opportunity to miss and, as we were all to find out, these are not just any old bears, these are very special bears who are worth fighting for. They are bears who have gone to hell and beyond all their lives, living under constant torture and pain in bile farms until being rescued by Jill and her wonderful team. Now they are cared for and have the freedom to walk, and to explore. They can lie in the sun, dig in rain puddles and feel the earth and grass beneath their feet.



Jill and Jasper



Billy

To see the rescued bears today you could be forgiven for forgetting what they have gone through. They are now happy, healthy, well cared for and contented bears, but look closely and you can still see their physical scars. Some have missing limbs whilst others have bald lines showing where the metal jackets, snares and bars have cut into them for years; others are blind and nearly all have many missing teeth - teeth that have either been knocked out or cut down by the bile farmer or just worn down on the cage bars by the bears in their desperation.



Clancy Jack

It is a truly amazing experience to see them now and to see how few show any lasting mental problems. Thanks to the constant and patient care of the Animals Asia team the bears have managed to at last live. They play and live happily together in large green enclosures. Each day their food is prepared and placed in new places and in new toys so that they can search it out. Different toys are placed in the enclosures and even the waterfalls into their ponds vary each day with the way the water gushes out, so no day is the same for them. They have swings, hammocks, trees and climbing frames to explore.

A striking example of a bear who has gone through sheer hell and who now has the life he deserves is Oliver who has become a sort of flagship bear for the sanctuary to illustrate what they are fighting for. Oliver is a brown bear who has suffered incarceration for thirty years! Thirty years is the natural life span for a brown bear, so this means he has been in pain and terror for all his life. As a result of his imprisonment he has many health problems, the most noticeable to a visitor being his stunted legs. Due to growing up in a crate he now looks like a sausage bear, which is not cute, it breaks your heart. But now he is spending the life he has left to him in peace and freedom being well cared for and well-loved by all who know him. He plays and explores his surroundings, enjoying the pool and the grass beneath him. Our first introduction to him reduced us all to tears as we found it hard to comprehend what he must have been through. Thinking of him still brings tears to my eyes but they are happy tears for the life he now has and we all hope he has many more years to enjoy his new free life. To see video of Oliver taken by Richard Symonds and me, see 'Oliver's Springtime' at Animal Asia's website.



Oliver

When we arrived at the sanctuary I had no idea of how powerful an effect the place would have on me, or in fact on all of us. At the sight of my first bear I was overcome and burst into tears. I then spent the rest of my time swinging from tears of joy at seeing them now and tears of pain thinking of what they had gone through before reaching the sanctuary. Now even a photo can bring all the emotions back to me.

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## “凯撒”的故事 — 过去 Caesar's story — Before



- “凯撒”是一头欧亚棕熊，虽然这个名字常常令人误解，但其实是一位“女士”。
- “凯撒”是在2004年2月从天津一个农户家救助的；当时它和另一只黑熊被关在狭小的铁笼里，身上穿着“铁马甲”，脾气十分暴躁，不断地用身体撞击铁笼，身上伤痕累累，腹部的导管将胆汁导引到“铁马甲”内的一个塑料袋里。
- 养熊场主承认他给“凯撒”穿“铁马甲”已长达9年时间。
- Caesar is a Eurasian brown bear.
- When she was rescued in February 2004, she was thin and ill, and had a metal "corset" strapped around her body, containing a plastic bag into which her bile was drained.
- The farmer admitted she had been forced to wear this contraption for 9 years.

Caesar at point of rescue, still wearing the “full metal jacket”.

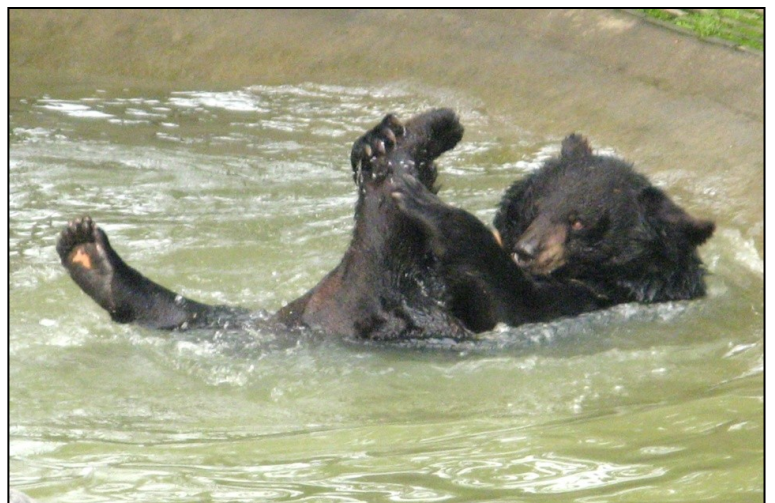


Caesar now!

Sadly not all the rescued bears make it. For some the kindest thing to do is to euthanize them to put them out of their pain and suffering. They are buried with love and dignity by the river in the sanctuary cemetery. A walk through a bamboo forest brings you to this haven, a very moving and peaceful place where white butterflies dance amongst small mounds of earth topped with simple wooden crosses. Each mound has a stone carrying the bear's name and the day it died. I found myself wandering into this place several times during our stay. Each time it would bring tears to my eyes and yet I also found it to be so beautiful. Whilst watching the butterflies floating about in the dappled haze of misty sunshine I could hear the faint sound of Chinese music. I felt this part of the sanctuary to be very special to me, so much so, that I am planning a memorial sculpture to put in amongst the bears. Scattered between the bears you can also find several graves with the name “Dog” on them. Many of the local workers now ask if they can bring their pet dogs for burial here. They are labelled simply “Dog” not out of disrespect, but because that is a common given name, as we would call our pets Rover or Nelly.



The cemetery



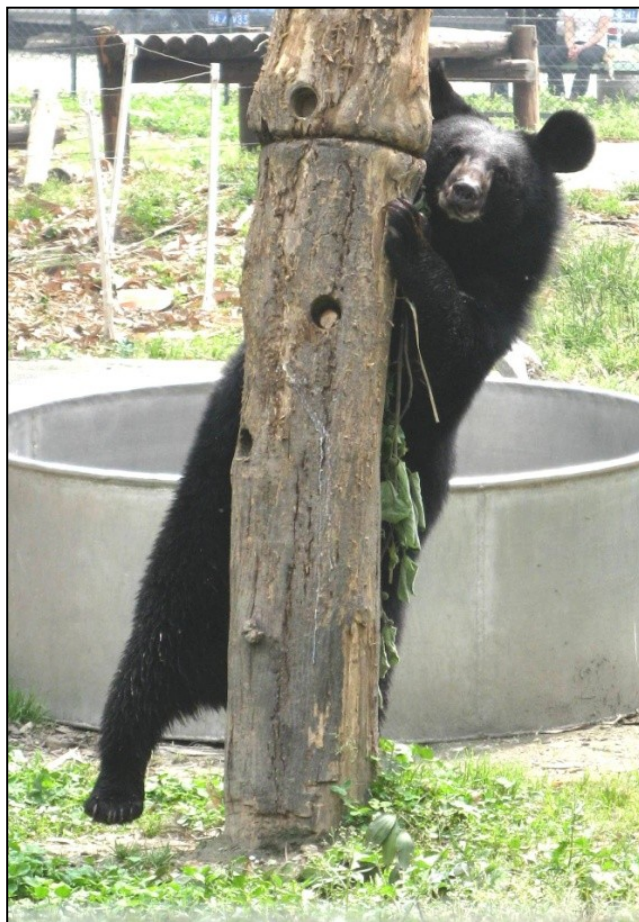
Paddy

This trip was not all about sorrow; it was also about being positive and doing what we can to put an end, sooner rather than later, to bear farming and the suffering of all the bears still to be freed. These animals are so long-suffering and stoical that they can endure years of horrific pain that would kill another animal. You may think “what is the point?”

That it is a battle that can't be won. But it can! The tide is changing; a majority of the Chinese people are now also calling for it to stop and the Chinese government is sympathetic. Let's help them. You may think that all this effort and struggle is a hopeless task, but visit this sanctuary and you will see the rescued bears finally able to live free and doing what bears should be able to do and you will realise that even to have saved only one bear would have made it all worthwhile.

At present there are just over one-hundred and seventy live and happy bears in the Chengdu Sanctuary and another seventy-nine bears and cubs in the Animals Asia sanctuary in Vietnam. Animals Asia is one of only two animal charities that actually own and run their own sanctuaries. The rescued bears are a lifetime commitment and need constant support. Each bear comes with its own tragic story, but each one has the relief of being freed from the crushing crates and pain. I cannot describe the feeling you get from being there. We spent just under a week there and not once did I get bored with looking at the bears. The days flew by and I envy the volunteers and workers whose job it is to observe these bears every day. What a job!

I hope from reading this you will be inspired to find out more about Animals Asia and that it will lead to you helping them too. You can look them up at [www.animalsasia.org](http://www.animalsasia.org)



Jingle

Thanks for taking the time to read this. This is a battle worth fighting and one that can be won!

If you would like to be on our mailing list for our Animals Asia exhibition next year, please contact us by letter or email and we will add you to our list.

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Visit You Tube to watch the following video's by

Richard Symonds

"Would you believe me"

"The first time ..."

"Oliver's Film"

<http://www.youtube.com/user/neenenoos>