

Bear Necessities

Rescue, Rehabilitation, Sanctuary, and Advocacy

Edited by

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Contents

List of Contributors VIII

Introduction 1

Lisa Kemmerer

PART I

Bear Basics

1 Bear Basics

Lisa Kemmerer 17

2 Bear-Aware for Twenty Years

Victor Watkins 35

3 Making a Difference for Bears in Asia

Amy Corrigan 45

4 Polar Bears: Watching Extinction in Real Time

Kassie Siegel and Brendan Cummings 53

PART II

A World of Problems

5 Franzi: Beloved Ambassador for Bears on Bile Farms 63

Jill Robinson

6 Little Bears, Big Trees, Tiny Insects: Protecting Sun Bears and their Rainforest 71

Lisa kemmerer and Siew Te Wong

7 Libearty Sanctuary Zarnesti: Sharing Love and Sheltering Life in Eastern Europe 79

Cristina Lapis

8 9,540,000 Square Miles, 800,000 American Black Bears, 3 Rescues 90

Charlotte Lorraine Cressey

9 Failing Giant Pandas: Captive Breeding and Conservation 99

Sarah M. Bexell

- 10 **Bear Baiting in Pakistan** 108
Fakhar -i- Abbas
- 11 **Dirty Dancing: Caring for Sloth Bears in India** 116
Lisa Kemmerer
- 12 **Sliding Down Mountainsides on My Butt in Search of the Elusive Andean Bear** 128
Dalma Zsalakó
- 13 **Finding Enrico: Protecting Andean Bears and their Habitat** 136
Lisa Kemmerer, Kerry Fugett and Simona Kobel

PART III

Policy

- 14 **Brown Bears, Salmon, People: Traveling Upstream to a Sustainable Future** 149
Chris Darimont, Kyle Artelle, Heather Bryan, Chris Genovali, Misty MacDuffee and Paul Paquet
- 15 **Cleaning up a Community for Black Bears** 165
Mick Webb
- 16 **U.S. Wildlife Agencies: Outdated, Misguided, and Destructive** 172
Lisa Kemmerer
- 17 **The Assignment: Breaking Laws to Build Laws on behalf of Lake Tahoe's Black Bears** 184
Ann Bryant
- 18 **A Grizzly Battle: Government Agencies, Endangered Species, and the U.S. Legal System** 192
Tara Zuardo
- 19 **Panda Preservation 2.0: Shifting Gears to Save a Species** 205
Anna Beech and Marc Brody

PART IV***Bears and Beyond***

- 20 **Canary in the Arctic** 215
Lisa Kemmerer
- 21 **Bears, Birds, and Human Hubris: Imagining Bears in the Andes** 224
Thomas Regele
- 22 **The Damage and Hope of Total Institutions: Visiting a Bear Sanctuary
in Cambodia** 231
Lisa Kemmerer and Daniel Kirjner
- 23 **Bear Naked: Compassion and Wilderness** 238
Dana Medoro
- Index** 247

Franzi: Beloved Ambassador for Bears on Bile Farms

Jill Robinson

Wednesday, October 7, 2009: As I peel Franzi her last grapes, I remember when I fell in love with her for the first time. It was on December 6, 2002; we had just closed down another brutal bear farm, but there was no time to celebrate. We were looking at the tiniest bear cringing in the corner of the tiniest cage we had ever seen. This little bear had given up hope—and small wonder, with her catalogue of injuries and abuses—she had clearly suffered for years. A hole in her abdomen poured with bile and pus and an abscess the size of a golf-ball throbbled with pain under her chin. She had been declawed, de-toothed, and demoralized. Franzi was just one of many victims of China's bear bile industry.

It took me about three seconds to fall in love with Franzi, to cry for her sorrowful eyes, which darted away from mine, afraid that this new person would hurt her as much as the last. On that day, she both won and broke my heart.

Loving Franzi

Franzi was one of 19 Asiatic black bears (also called “moon bears” because of the beautiful yellow crescents on their chests) confiscated from a bile farm, and transported to our Moon Bear Rescue Centre outside the capital of Sichuan, Chengdu. She had been milked daily for her bile for many years.

Bear bile is used by some traditional Chinese medicine practitioners as a remedy for “heat-related” conditions affecting organs such as the eyes and liver, even though many practitioners know that herbal alternatives are cheaper, just as effective, and cruelty-free. There are also many affordable synthetic options. Nonetheless, bear bile products are still used to treat everything from hangovers to impotence, and are even touted as a cure for cancer.

Franzi had been a slave to this unnecessary trade for more than two decades. Standing before us, she was a perfect and tragic example of “stress dwarfism”: she had a normal bear-shaped head, but a crudely stunted body because she had been squashed in a cage just 18 inches high, 3 feet long, and 19 inches wide (90cm x 45cm x 50cm) for more than 22 years. The legacy of this cage, now

stacked with a pile of other rusting torture traps in the grounds of our Moon Bear Rescue Centre, stayed with Franzi throughout her life. The depleted shell of an animal that emerged from those cruel bars was just three and a half feet (100cm) tall and weighed just 105 pounds (48kg).

At first, Franzi wouldn't look at us. She stared at the bottom of her cage, her chest rising and falling as she breathed great gulps of fear, dreading what would befall her next at the hands of humanity. Then her nose quivered, and her head turned towards me—she had caught the smell of something new, and too tempting to ignore—a fruity shake with strawberries, apples, mangos, jam—and so much more—just in front of her nose. Even more astonishingly, it was all for her!

Gingerly extending her soft, pink tongue, Franzi sampled the delicious drink—and there was no going back. She closed her eyes and slurped, and slurped, and slurped. As she got to the bottom of the pot, I poured the rest onto my fingers—not the most sensible thing to do with a newly rescued bear; but I was rewarded for my carelessness with the softness of her velvety lips as she gently sucked the remainder of her first smoothie—her first taste of kindness.

From that point on, Franzi took charge of her diet. She would sometimes refuse to eat “proper” bear food, standing firm for two or three days while we patiently encouraged her to behave like a bear. Inevitably, she would win and we would wearily relent, offering her exactly what she was holding out for—her favourite sachets of dog food with gravy. She even trained us how to offer her grapes (peeled and deseeded) by contemptuously spitting out the skin and pips.

In January 2003, a month after her arrival, Franzi continued to worry us with bouts of ill health, and by occasionally refusing to eat. Our head veterinarian was particularly worried, calling attention to Franzi's laboured breathing and associated lung problems. Over those weeks, she felt it was her duty to prepare us for the worst, noting that it “didn't look good” for this elderly female with multiple health problems. But Franzi, in her normal style, now well-loved and well fed, ignored sound veterinary science and happily puttered around the garden for special-needs bears for seven years, demanding her favourite foods, and sleeping in the sun.

When we weren't fretting over her health, Franzi always made us laugh. Politely described as a “windy” bear, she burped and farted with abandon—most frequently when I was showing her off to a very large group of visitors. She timed the passing of gas for those special moments when visitors stood respectfully around her den, listening to the poignant story of her tragic past. How could any of us keep a straight face after Franzi let rip with all the smugness of an elderly Aunt?

Bears and Bile

Bears are the only mammals to produce significant amounts of ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) in their bile. This is the much-sought “magic” medical ingredient: Bear bile brings a tidy U.S. \$585 per kg on the streets of Chengdu, and far more on the overseas black market. It is illegal to export bear products from China, but trade thrives nonetheless. Malaysia, Korea, and China have the highest demand for bear bile. Australia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, the U.S., and Canada also have a market for bear bile. Consumers are predominantly of Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean origin.

There are eight bear species in the world, and the Asiatic black bear (*Ursus selenarctos*, moon bear) has been most affected by the ongoing human demand for bile acid. Consequently, these bears are listed under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the most critical category of endangerment. Though their range extends from Iran to Japan and across Southeast Asia, today as few as 16,000 individuals are left in the wilds of China, and perhaps as few as 25,000 across their range in Asia.

Moon bears have been killed for their gall bladders for thousands of years, but only recently, in the past 20 years, have entrepreneurial farmers in Korea, China, and Vietnam discovered that enslaving bears in tiny cages and milking them regularly for bile is far more lucrative than hunting them down in the wild.

“Bile” bears are usually milked twice a day in China, a process that is excruciatingly painful. Since Franzi’s rescue, the Chinese government has banned the use of catheters to drain bile. Instead, farmers must use the free-drip method of bile extraction—which is every bit as agonizing for the bears as the previous technique. Under the free-drip system, a permanent hole is cut into the abdomen, clear through to the gall bladder, from which bile drips. The wound is invariably infected and inflamed. To keep the hole open, the bears’ abdomens are prodded and poked with metal rods or tubes. Sometimes, against regulations, Perspex catheters are concealed underneath the skin—cut flush with the wound—to keep the hole open.

Today, Animals Asia estimates that more than 14,000 moon bears are trapped on farms across China and Vietnam. (Animals Asia operates bear rescue projects in both countries.) The Vietnamese government, with the help of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, attempted to protect the country’s few remaining wild bears by microchipping all 4,000 bears on farms, and banning the extraction of bile. Bears can now only be kept in cages as “tourist attractions,” but allowing some endangered animals to be exploited for profit ultimately endangers the entire species. Too often, bears kept as “tourist attractions”

are exploited for bile. In Vietnam, bile is collected illegally with the assistance of an ultrasound machine, catheter, and medicinal pump. The bears are drugged (usually with an illegal drug, ketamine) restrained with ropes, and jabbed with a four-inch needle until the gall bladder is located and robbed of bile. Busloads of visitors arrive at these farms from such destinations as Korea, where bile is a popular hangover “cure,” and leave with viles of bile, fresh from the body of an anaesthetised bear.

Bears farmed for bile are fed just enough tasteless gruel to keep them alive—starving a bear produces more bile. They do not have free access to water, even in mid-summer. Some cages have sliding metal grilles inside, which farmers use to push the bears flat to the floor of the cage, making bile extraction easier. Sometimes these grilles rust so that they will not move, and bears are held immobile for weeks, or even months.

Bile farmers brutalise bears to destroy their natural defences. For example, their paw tips are hacked away to ensure that their claws will never grow back, and their teeth are smashed from their powerful jaws. Consequently, it is unlikely that any bears rescued from bile farms can ever be released back into the wild. They also lack basic survival skills (because they have spent their lives behind bars), and they are ill from neglect and abuse. Rescued bears from bile farms often suffer from an array of debilitating ailments, such as severe arthritis, peritonitis, and weeping ulcers. They die of liver cancer at a troublesome rate, though liver tumours are normally extremely rare among all but the oldest captive bears. Many farmed bears are missing limbs because they have been illegally caught from the wild with snares or leghold traps, and some are blind from malnutrition or trauma. The bile of bears who are milked for years in unhygienic conditions is often contaminated with blood, urine, faeces, pus, bacteria, and cancer cells—they are only alive because they are pumped full of antibiotics. Vets describe their bile as “black sludge” (a healthy bear’s bile is a yellow-green liquid).

Bears exploited for their bile have a plethora of medical problems, many of which are not only incurable, but debilitating. Kiki, for example, a young male rescued in 2008 from a Chinese bile farm, arrived with necrotic flesh, with his right eye literally rotting away. Most of his teeth were shattered, and several had been pulled from his jaw, which was broken.

Animal Asia’s veterinary team is collecting evidence, and working with independent pathologists, to convince authorities that the bear bile industry is not only cruel and unnecessary, but also a serious health risk for humans. Through posters, ads, the media, and public education campaigns, we are informing consumers in the hope that they will turn away from medicines or tonics that could harm rather than heal their bodies, and which definitely

harms bears. Meanwhile, we continue to work with the governments of China and Vietnam to close down the worst bile farms, and to provide sanctuary for as many bears as possible. Every rescued bear becomes an ambassador for the cause—the eradication of bear farming. These bears, with their compromised physical or psychological health, give us tangible proof that bile farming is unconscionably cruel, unnecessary, and should be closed down.

All animals are remarkably similar in their capacity to experience pain and suffering, and we all have a complex range of emotions. The feelings a bear or pig experience are every bit as profound as our own. It is a shameful reflection of human nature that we are cruel to other sentient beings, treating them dismissively, as if they were “things” rather than individuals.

As the fullness of our responsibility for the health of the environment becomes clear, we must also recognise our responsibility for non-human individuals, and acknowledge that our treatment of cattle, chickens, tigers, and bears affects the fragile state of the earth. It is time for us to change. To care about bears means to care about the forests they inhabit, the water they drink, and the air that they breathe. Striving for a cruelty-free lifestyle is perhaps the greatest gift we can give this planet. Breeding animals for human food takes up huge amounts of land, water, grain, and fuel. The antibiotics and other drugs that are used in modern farming methods ultimately seep into the soil. Growing vegetables and grains takes up just a fraction of the land and requires far fewer resources. When we choose vegetables and grains over meat, we choose to save the natural habitat of bears and other endangered animals around the world.

As consumers, even the smallest change in our lives can have the most profound effect on the lives of animals everywhere. Along with choosing meals that do not include animal products, we can make many other cruelty-free choices as shoppers. We can buy cosmetics and soaps that have not been tested on animals, coats and accessories without fur trim, and “pleather” instead of leather, for example. These are simple of choices, but they mean the world to nonhuman animals.

Losing Franzi

There was no better ambassador for exploited animals than Franzi, who came to trust and enjoy the company of the very species that tortured her for decades. She showed us all what it means to forgive. Though she was wracked with constant pain for 22 long years, trapped in a pitiless existence, her zest for life was an inspiration. She survived for three decades (almost 100 years in human terms).

But Franzi grew old, and tired, and we knew it was time to let her go. On that sad and memorable day, we had only one last chance to spoil her. As I went to collect her favourite foods there were no words to describe my sadness. She was sitting up at the bars of her cage in her perfect “teddy bear pose,” which we taught her so that we could easily listen to her heart and lungs with a stethoscope while she received her treats.

She began her small meal with a taster of rich dog food, followed by a piece of fruit mince tart. The latter because Franzi wasn’t going to be seeing Christmas, and also in memory of her encounter with Australian conservationist Steve Irwin (rest in peace), who called her a “hot little tart” when he set eyes on her determined expression and luscious fur.

As it turned out, Steve was spot-on about Franzi. She was rather choosy about her company, and seemed to hate the presence of other bears in “her” space. Nonetheless, she finally grew attached to brain-damaged Rupert, with his slow, clumsy reactions and strangely lopsided face. A unique and loving friendship was born. Sweet and gentle Rupert had a “central brain lesion,” most likely caused by the free-drip bile-extraction hole in his abdomen, through which bacteria had entered and infected his brain. (Although in no pain and deeply contented during his years at our sanctuary, Rupert’s condition was a poignant reminder of why the free-drip method of bile extraction is every bit as cruel and damaging as the older method.) Franzi and Rupert adored each other. Even though Franzi was dwarfed by Rupert, who was three times her size, she dominated him from beginning to end. She flirted and flounced during spring mating season, then mischievously walked away—even though he appeared interested—leaving Rupert to cosy up to a bag full of straw. The only time Franzi honoured love-struck Rupert with anything resembling intimacy was on the coldest of winter days, when she cheekily snuggled up to him for warmth. Most of the time, she kept him on his toes, and showed him exactly who was boss.

I slowly and deliberately prepared Franzi’s last meal; my heart was breaking for Rupert. But also for Peejou, a tortoiseshell cat who had taken up residence at our bear sanctuary. Peejou had always seemed to know instinctively that Franzi wouldn’t mind if she explored her secret garden, and indeed Franzi never did—the two eyed each other with great interest while Peejou sniffed her way around, maintaining a respectful distance. Franzi was not aggressive, and was willing to share the delights of life at the sanctuary with a small cat. Peejou would miss Franzi, too.

Preparing Franzi’s last meal brought back a flood of memories. She loved nuts but disliked cherry tomatoes. Most bears love cherry tomatoes, but Franzi preferred to play with them instead, and had a quirky and endearing habit of

carefully clutching them in her clawless paws, then raising her arms to throw them over her shoulder. And pity poor Rupert if he came too close, hoping to Hoover up her tomato rejects. Franzi never hesitated to place a well-aimed thwack on Rupert's tender nose. Always the gentleman, Rupert knew the rules, and would back off respectfully, returning only when Franzi walked away, leaving her leftovers.

Slowly peeling the last of Franzi's grapes, I remembered the cold, winter's day, when I looked out of my window onto the garden for special-care bears, which lay just outside my room, to see her carrying a huge pile of straw in her mouth, striding purposefully back to her den. Bears normally create dens for the winter, and Franzi could see that this straw would make a warm cosy bed for the cold weeks ahead—just how she liked it, thank you very much.

While Franzi sat in front of me one final time, gently taking and relishing each grape (seedless of course), her posture reminded me of how she stuck out her little disfigured chest, allowing the vet to place a stethoscope over her fading heart—her eyes glancing sideways, anticipating the treats she would receive if she could just hold still. She trusted us, yet now we would take her life. Her heart and lungs were failing. The vet team had removed six litres of fluid from her chest cavity, but it was refilling. The scales had tipped, and her quality of life was sliding. Even with regular medication and the best of veterinary care,



FIGURE 5.1 *Asiatic Black Bear*

Franzi's abdomen was unnaturally distended and no doubt uncomfortable. We knew what her trust required of us—it was time to let her go.

Franzi gently accepted the last of the peeled green grapes as we told her, for the very last time, how much we loved her. Then we made room for the veterinarian, who silently administered the anaesthetic. Franzi slipped into a deep sleep, blissfully unaware that her special care area was filled with adoring visitors. We, her family, had gathered to hold her tiny clawless paws and say a respectful, tearful, goodbye.

While we held vigil, the vet team injected sodium pentobarbital that gently ended her life. Franzi's body was shrunken—as small as a cub, yet larger than life—her spirit was bigger than China. Franzipants, our teacher, our friend, our hot little tart—sleep well, little bear.