Hope for India's dancing bears

Tooth removal hurts and traumatises the bears

By Alex Kirby
BBC News Online environment correspondent

India's first bear sanctuary has opened its doors to 16 animals formerly used to earn money as "dancing bears".

The sanctuary has been paid for by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), working with an Indian group, Wildlife SOS.

The sanctuary, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, will hold between 40 and 50 bears when it is full.

WSPA estimates that about 1,000 animals are used as dancing bears across India.

It says the practice, which is banned, is accelerating the decline of the sloth bears used for dancing, with more than 100 cubs taken illegally from the wild each year.

Long-term problems

Less than a year old, a cub may have a rope or chain forced through its nose and most of its teeth removed, without anaesthetic.

WSPA says the bears are trained to dance "through a regime of pain and starvation".
with few surviving to much more than eight years. In the wild they can live up to three times as long.

All the bears in the Agra sanctuary were brought in voluntarily by their former owners, members of the Kalandar tribe who traditionally use dancing bears to raise money on the streets.

Several animals had maggot-infested wounds when they arrived at the sanctuary, and one had had an eye gouged out. Many are still traumatised.

The bears range in age from three to fifteen years, and all come from the Agra area.

**Aiming at abolition**

The sanctuary, now managed by Wildlife SOS and the Indian authorities, is about 17 acres (7 ha) in size. It has electric fencing and a walled perimeter.

As well as artificial dens and two large pools, it contains two quarantine pens, a laboratory, and a veterinary clinic.

Victor Watkins of Libearty, WSPA's global campaign for bears, said the opening of the Agra sanctuary was a milestone in the group's efforts to consign dancing bears to history.

He said: "For the first time, the authorities have a purpose-built place where confiscated bears can live out the rest of their lives.

"We have helped stop the tradition of dancing bears in Greece and Turkey and hope that, in time, we will also see this cruelty abandoned in India."

**Mistaken identity**
Sloth bears are found not only in India but in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh as well.

Their main diet is ants and termites - they can be heard from some miles away sucking up termites.

The bears, which are classified by the World Conservation Union as vulnerable, are hunted by farmers to prevent crop damage and also for their gall bladders, which are used in Asian medicines.

Scientists originally thought the animals were in fact sloths, and they were called bear sloths until closer examination led to their name reversal.

*Images courtesy of WSPA*
In the past ten years WSPA's Libearty campaign has established bear sanctuaries in eight countries. Whether they re-home former dancing bears, bears used in bear baiting, or bears orphaned by hunting, they play a key role in ending the persecution of these magnificent animals.

The history of the dancing bear is an old and savage one. The exploitation of bears has long since existed in countries where there is a wild bear population: Ancient Greeks trained wild beasts such as bears, lions and horses, followed by the Romans who exhibited bears alongside elephants and tigers in their amphitheatres. The tradition spread throughout the world, remaining fashionable into the Middle Ages, where travelling performers displayed dancing bears, and bears performed at marketplaces throughout the Renaissance. The arrival of modern circuses around this time did little to help the bear's plight.

Britain banned dancing bears in 1911; but it has persisted in many other parts of the world, particularly Eastern Europe, Turkey and India. Until recently, it was popular as a form of income for gypsies and nomadic tribes, although WSPA's campaigning has virtually eradicated this. WSPA launched Libearty, the world campaign for bears, in 1992 in order to expose the misery, torture and abuse of bears, including those illegally taken from the wild as cubs and forced to 'dance' and pose for tourists. Their mothers are shot to gain access, or killed for sport.

The campaign is headed by WSPA's Victor Watkins, and was launched in 1992. Victor said: "WSPA started Libearty because we realised that there was little dedicated work being done for bears around the world. We catalogued a whole range of issues, like dancing bears and bear baiting, and launched the campaign to put a stop to these practices and highlight the plight of bears around the world."

In 1992, WSPA exposed the mistreatment of dancing bears in Greece and Turkey,
eventually stopping the tradition in these countries. In the same year, a bear sanctuary for rescued dancing bears was built in Greece. Legislation passed in Turkey, rendering the spectacle of dancing bears illegal, has enabled over forty bears to be confiscated. They now live in a twelve-acre semi-wild, forest sanctuary, complete with trees and freshwater pools, in the Turkish mountains.

In Bulgaria, the last place in Europe where this illegal tradition still openly exists, around twenty-five bears have been poached or purchased on the black market and subjected to a harsh training regime. The standard method of training involves forcing a thick iron ring through the nose, which causes considerable pain when yanked. The bears dance in an attempt to avoid the pain. Alternatively, music is played whilst the bear stands on hot plates, where it will dance to stop being burnt. It will then dance whenever it hears music. When not performing, the bears are chained up with little shelter, no exercise and limited food and water. Injuries are common. Now, only misguided foreign tourists perpetuate the tradition by giving money. WSPA has met with government officials to discuss the use of dancing bears in Bulgaria and works to educate tourists.
Dancing Bears
The cruel practice of ‘dancing bears’ has been banned in many countries such as Greece and Turkey, but they are still used for entertainment in many parts of Asia, especially India. Bears travel from village to village and are made to ‘dance’ to large crowds for money. The long distances travelled often result in damage to their feet and many bears become ill and die because of their poor living conditions.

How they are caught
Cubs are taken from their mothers by poachers at 3 – 5 weeks. The bear cubs are poorly treated and may not be fed or watered for several days and many die before they can be sold on to their trainers.

Acts of cruelty
The young bears have their canine teeth removed with an iron bar and pliers with no anaesthetic. Their noses are pierced with an iron needle and a ring is inserted with a rope attached to control them. Bears are tied up at a stake on a very short length of rope and are unable to turn or stand up and are forced to lie in very uncomfortable positions.

Training
The bears are controlled by pain. They are taught to stand on their hind legs, by having their noses pulled up. Finally they learn to ‘dance’ from one foot to the other, as the trainer hits each foot in turn with a stick or makes them stand on hot plates while playing music. Later the trainer will just have to hit the ground with the stick or play music and the bear will ‘dance’. Many bears are injured during training and some die.
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