Holistic management for rescued bears

Nicola Field heads Animal Asia’s veterinary team in China. The charity is dedicated to ending bear bile farming and here she describes how the team takes an integrated approach to caring for the bears.

Across Asia, thousands of bears are farmed for their bile. In China alone more than 10,000 bears are kept on bile farms, and around 2400 suffer a similar fate in Vietnam. The bears have their bile extracted daily. Bile has historically been used in traditional medicine, but it has also now found its way into many household products.

Bile is extracted using various invasive techniques that can cause infection. This practice continues despite the availability of effective and affordable herbal and synthetic alternatives. The bears that we rescue – mainly Asiatic black bears (Ursus thibetanus), some brown bears (Ursus arctos) and a few sun bears (Ursus malayanus) – are cared for and rehabilitated at bear sanctuaries in China and Vietnam. They vary in age from young cubs to bears that have been kept on farms for up to 30 years.

At the bile farms the bears are generally kept in small cages, in a non-stimulating environment, where they endure tremendous suffering. When they come to us most of them are in a deplorable physical and psychological condition. Surgery is required to remove their infected gall bladders and they often have numerous other health problems.

Typically, the issues we encounter include malnutrition, dental disease, ophthalmic disease, cholecystitis, liver cancer, osteoarthritis, chronic stress, abdominal herniation and internal abscessation, etc.

Their injuries are addressed through a holistic management strategy that incorporates veterinary and behavioural expertise. Our approach incorporates the needs of our bears and recognises the integration of these elements for their health and wellbeing. Many factors come into play and none has more importance than another. They include providing nutritious food, enrichment, preventative care, good husbandry, minimising stress, promoting species-specific natural behaviour and routine health checks, among others. Bear management infiltrates every aspect of the medical care and is important in veterinary decision-making and case management. Consequently, communication and record keeping are key in our sanctuaries, with vets, VNs and the bear management team working cohesively to provide the best possible care.

Veterinary roles

While the majority of the ‘bear and vet team’ are locally employed and capacity building is an integral part of Animals Asia’s work, we do employ overseas vets and have employed vets from the USA, the UK, Australia and the Netherlands. These are usually two-year posts, but some vets have stayed up to twice as long.

The vets come with a range of experience; ideally, we want vets with at least three years’ work experience in a large mixed veterinary practice, zoological facility, specialist referral centre, or similar. We need vets with excellent clinical and organisational skills, attention to detail, an aptitude for problem-solving medicine and self-directed learning, as well as plenty of initiative and flexibility. It also helps to have a good sense of humour, excellent communication skills and the ability to live and work closely with a team that comprises Western and local staff. Cultural sensitivity is crucial in this work and a history of working abroad is always useful, as is a background in captive wildlife management or charitable veterinary work.

All foreign staff live on site, which is around a 40-minute drive from Chengdu, Sichuan – a city of 14 million people. The sanctuary is surrounded by farmland, although not far from the urban sprawl.
Ten-minute chat

Amy Stamp is a 20-year-old vet student at Nottingham. A keen writer and musician, she has found outlets for her talents through a blog, ‘Ill creatures great and small’, and a newly established campus orchestra.

What made you decide to blog?
I have always loved writing, and, right up until going to university, English was my favourite subject. As a child I filled an exercise book with ‘The Adventures of Paddy and Chips’ – stories of the exciting things my rabbit and guinea pig got up to while I was at school. Not long after, my mum and I started reading the Herriot books to each other while waiting for my sister at her singing lessons. I decided that if I ever got to be a vet, I would write a book too. The blog is a way of recording my time at vet school.

Is ‘Ill creatures great and small’ your first blog?
Yes, though I’ve always written in some form. I have always struggled to keep a diary regularly, so I like recording my life online instead – it motivates me to write knowing that an audience is reading it. Plus my mum especially gets upset if I don’t write for a while, so I have her to keep happy too!

What do you blog about?
Whatever comes to mind really. It’s normally about the various things I’ve got up to at vet school, like interesting trips, practicals and EMS placements, but I often write about other things that have happened on campus or at home, like open mic nights, formal dining-ins, Christmas in Hull, busking, etc.

Do you have to think about what you’re going to write?
The hardest part is deciding what to write about. Often so much has happened I have a surplus of topics rather than not enough. Once that’s decided, it flows easily. I do have to proof read well though! I am a fan of the unnecessarily long sentence.

What made you decide to share your thoughts?
When applying to vet school, I remember it feeling very far away and unreal. Nobody had written a blog about Nottingham, so I wanted to try to accurately represent life at this vet school for people who wanted to know. I try to be as honest as possible with both the positives and the negatives of life in the vet school.

Who reads your blog?
It’s a mixture. A lot of my family (even my grandparents are signed up for e-mail notifications) as well as friends, which is nice to see, especially when they are non-vet students or know me from home. I get quite a few comments from vets and vet students elsewhere in the country or the world, and the occasional comment from people I wouldn’t expect, like the mums of prospective vet students or former school teachers.

Have you had any surprising reactions?
Well, being asked to do this was pretty surprising. It was also strange in first year being recognised by older years, and this year by some freshers who’d read my blog before arriving. One of the best reactions was being featured in last year’s Vet Revue. I’ve never laughed so much, even if my impersonator didn’t quite master my East Yorkshire accent.

What about Facebook and Twitter?
I use both. Facebook is a great way of keeping in touch with everyone, and a convenient way of sharing vet school work in our groups and organising society committees. I love Twitter too though; it means I can follow people and companies I’m interested in on a professional level (I know of someone who got their first job interview through Twitter), but also tweets by people I find amusing.

Tell us about your music
Before coming to Nottingham I was in three orchestras and two choirs, and being on a campus with no ensembles I soon found myself with withdrawal symptoms. By coincidence, there were three other equally enthusiastic musicians in my year, so three months into first year, and between two lectures on anatomy, we planned to set up an orchestra – the Sutton Bonington Symphony Orchestra. A year on we have an orchestra of 56, a jazz band of 22 and a choir of 25, made up of, and performing to, staff, students and the local people. It’s the thing I’m most proud of.

How do you find the time for your studies?
I rely quite heavily on understanding things properly during the lectures themselves, as with the orchestra, jazz band and choir rehearsals, music soc, vet soc and entertainments committee responsibilities, plus finding time to write about it all on my blog, my spare time disappears quite rapidly. Nottingham’s teaching style is ideal for me, with concepts introduced in lectures, emphasised in group work and put into context in practicals, so by the end of the week most things make sense. I wouldn’t want it any other way though – at least I never have to worry about getting bored! We aim to have two veterinary surgeons working at any one time. All the bears at the sanctuary are routinely health checked every two years, which equates to carrying out two to three health checks a week. These include running blood tests, ultrasound examination of the abdomen and heart, an ocular examination, a dental examination, and a full musculoskeletal examination noting any crepitus and decreased range of motion, and taking x-rays.

Veterinary personnel.

Once a week we hold a small animal clinic that primarily involves neutering and vaccination of staff pets, and this is an area that we hope to expand. Our vets also do outreach work collaborating on veterinary capacity and training or shelter management. Developing expertise, knowledge and understanding of the impacts of bile farming on the bears is crucial and Animals Asia has enjoyed collaborations with international and national specialists in cardiology, ophthalmology, dentistry and anaesthesia.

Vets, bear managers and VNs also contribute to animal welfare, behavioural and veterinary workshops and conferences across Asia and the globe.

Working in Animals Asia’s sanctuaries is a unique experience that challenges and touches all those who join the team. For most, the experience of working with the bears results in personal and professional growth.
Ten-minute chat

Amy Stamp

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