



PLAYFUL: A rescued cub plays on a wooden climber inside a nursery at the animal charity's refuge in Cambodia. A total of 172 bears have found shelter at the refuge so far.

THE BEAR NECESSITIES FOR SURVIVAL

Saving and caring for animals that are treated badly and are under threat has become a lifelong job for a dedicated few across a wide part of the region *By Tibor Krausz*

The bear cub is spoiling for a fight. Barely five months old, Willow was until recently a little creature hovering between life and death after she was rescued in Cambodia, where wildlife trafficking remains endemic. Her mother had already been killed by poachers when the cub was found wandering in distress on the edge of a rice field in Mondulakiri province in the country's rural northeast.

Now, however, Willow is safe, well-fed and healthy. She lives with about 131 other bears at a sprawling refuge built and run by an Australian animal charity, Free the Bears Fund, which has saved hundreds of endangered Asiatic sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus*) and Asiatic black bears, also known as "moon bears" (*Ursus thibetanus*), from Vietnam to Thailand and from Laos to India.

The refuge features spacious enclosures and leafy roaming grounds with natural thickets and rocky outcrops. It lies within a sprawling government-run wildlife sanctuary in Takeo province, about 40km south of the capital Phnom Penh.

The charity operates similar shelters for scores of other bears in Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and India.

At its Bear Rescue Centre in northern Laos, which was set up in 2003 and is situated at the scenic Kuang Si Falls in Luang Prabang province, Free the Bears provides home to 34 furry residents, several of them having been rescued over the past few weeks.

Bears will be bears, so Willow — the 172nd bear the charity has saved so far in Cambodia — loves a bit of a playful scrap. Still only the size of a bulldog and with matching tenacity, she scampers underfoot and circles Matt Hunt, the British chief executive of Free the Bears who has dropped by the nursery during one of his frequent visits from Phnom Penh.

She then pounces, catching Mr Hunt unaware as she clambers over him from behind and begins playfully nipping at his ears while he sits on the edge of the nursery's concrete paddling pool.

"Crazy psycho baby," says Mr Hunt as he starts play-wrestling the cub. "Are we getting into a

tussle? Are we?" Willow persists so he tickles her sides and rubs her tummy. "Is this what you want? Is it?" Before long, though, the bear cub is back on top of him after another playful sneak attack from behind.

A Cambodian keeper, with a milk bottle in hand, gently coaxes the spirited bear cub off Mr Hunt, who resumes his inspection. "Each bear has a huge character bursting to get out," Mr Hunt, 40, observes. "It's amazing to watch animals that arrive here terrified, emaciated and shivering in a corner come alive and throw themselves head-first into play."

Many of the sanctuary's bears have been saved from imminent death or a life of neglect and privation. Kong was kept as an attraction in a Phnom Penh bar, his sight permanently damaged from being fed on a diet of leftovers and beer. Holly was rescued as a nine-month-old cub from a restaurant just as she was about to be butchered for a local delicacy — bear paw soup.

Mokiyap arrived as a stunted young bear after he was rescued from a cage where he had been

kept chained up as a pet, neglected and under-fed. James and his sister Rose were discovered as two motherless young cubs, hog-tied and half-starved in a wildlife trafficker's truck: they both lost a paw to injuries inflicted by crude poachers' snares.

These bears' travails are hardly unique. Sun and moon bears — whose combined ranges cover much of Southeast Asia, southern China and northern India — face a variety of dangers in the wild. Intense deforestation has devastated their natural habitats and within their ever-diminishing forest homes the animals have been decimated by illegal poaching.

"Thousands of animals around the region are caught in snares each year," explained Nick Marx, the British director of wildlife rescue for the international conservationist group Wildlife Alliance, which has freed numerous exotic animals, like slow lorises, elephants and bears, from snares and captivity across Cambodia with his local rapid-response team. "If the hunters do not return to check on the snares regularly, the animals often simply starve to death," he said.

Sun and moon bears are especially prized for their bile, which many people in the region think can cure many illnesses. From Laos to Vietnam, thousands of bears continue to languish in tiny cages at illegal bear farms with crude catheters inserted into their gall bladders to drain their bile

regularly, as if on a tap. Numerous other bears are kept as exotic pets in equally appalling conditions. Yet others wind up with their paws chopped off to serve as ingredients for bear paw soup, a pricey local dish targeted at wealthy patrons.

Yet despite their tribulations, Malaysian sun bears and Asiatic black bears, two closely related species, are routinely overlooked in global conservation efforts. Chalk that up to what's known as "the Panda Effect". While China's endangered mascot can make global headlines with just a sneeze, its cousins further south remain largely ignored. "I hate those bloody pandas," Mr Hunt quips. "It's often as if no other bears even existed."

For Mary Hutton, they do exist. "There's so much more to do," said Ms Hutton, a grandmother turned renowned conservationist from Perth, Australia, who founded Free the Bears two decades ago on a whim. In 1993, Ms Hutton saw an Australian television report showing an Asiatic black bear at a bear farm in China. "It got to me — that distraught little bear banging its head against the bars of its cage," she recalled.

She drew up a petition, stood outside a shopping mall in Perth and started collecting signatures. Boosted by the widespread support she received, she bought a fax machine and set up Free the Bears Fund in 1995.

"Raffles, lamington drives, movie nights, collection tins — you name it, we did it," she said. Today, she still operates her venture through the same methods, raising US\$70,000 (about 2.5 million baht) a month for her charity's regional operations from Cambodia to Laos to India. "I didn't see it coming," she said. "I just saw a TV programme and wanted to do something."

In 1997, Ms Hutton found herself in Cambodia, a country then in the grip of a vicious civil war and struggling to recover from the brutal, genocidal reign of the Khmer Rouge, which ruled the country from 1975 to 1979 and murdered an estimated two million people.

An Australian who had heard of Ms Hutton's newly launched bear-saving efforts back home called her in Australia to say he'd just bought three sun bear cubs at a Phnom Penh market in a bid to save them, but didn't know what to do with them.

So she "took a change of underwear, socks and sunscreen" and went to a country she knew nothing about. "Cambodia might as well have been on the moon, as far as I knew," she said. She started petitioning Australian politicians and officials so Mr Hobbs, Victoria and Lucille, as the three rescued bear cubs were named, could find a new home at Sydney's Taronga Zoo.

That same year the tireless animal rights activist also started building a sanctuary for bears in Takeo province from donations and funds she raised back home in Perth while running the charity from her garage, which she had converted into an office. "When we started here, we didn't even have a shovel," Ms Hutton said during a recent visit to Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre in Takeo, standing by a new bear clinic her charity had built.

"We did it in stages. First we built an enclosure in 1998. Then we built a cub enclosure. Then we built another enclosure, then a bear den, and on and on."

In 2013, at its sanctuary in northern Laos, her non-profit organisation made medical history by successfully performing complex brain surgery on a three-year-old moon bear called Champa. Rather than euthanise the animal, which was suffering from a severe case of hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, Free the Bears flew in a veterinary specialist from South Africa to operate on the animal using the painstaking laparoscopic, or keyhole, surgery.

"We do whatever we can to save any bear," said Ms Hutton. One of the hundreds of bears she's saved was Bertha, an Asiatic black bear with peculiar blondish fur. Once Bertha spent all her time cooped up in a dingy little cell in Thailand's Lop Buri Zoo. Thanks to Hutton, the bear soon found herself free to roam around a spacious enclosure with other bears in Takeo. She could now gambol in a pond, explore the woods at the back or loll about in her favourite hammock in the shade out front.



A BEAR HUG: Mary Hutton, the Australian founder of Free the Bears Fund, with a newly rescued cub at the animal charity's sanctuary in Takeo province in Cambodia.

"When we brought her here, she began feeling the grass with her paws like a kitten," Ms Hutton recalled. "She'd never felt grass under her paw. She just rolled over on her back, put her paws up in the air, and was delighted just to be out in the open under the sun. Watching her, I felt that even if we didn't do anything else, we'd done enough to change the life of this one poor little bear."

In November, the Aussie grandmother was declared the winner of this year's Jeanne Marchig Animal Welfare Award in Britain. Over the years she's won myriad other awards and accolades.

A gracious and unassuming woman in her late seventies, Ms Hutton played down her achievements. "Without people's help I couldn't have done a thing," she said. "I have a wonderful team."

Over the past two decades she has dealt with culture shock, political upheavals and recalcitrant officials across the region as she went about saving and rehabilitating hundreds of needy bears. "The corruption is absolutely appalling," said the grandmother, who is a dainty yet tenacious figure. "But we've also had some marvellous support."

In 2005 her son Simon, who worked as Free the

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MARY HUTTON
FREE THE BEARS

Bears' project director, was run over and killed in Phnom Penh. Although heartbroken, Ms Hutton carried on. "Bears are adorable creatures. The more I do, the more I feel I want to do for them."

Her bears in the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre live in comfort on picturesque grounds covering 17 acres. Nosy and mischievous younger bears traipse over aerial walkways and splash about in pools, while the older animals loll in the shade or doze in their dens. Even bears that lost a paw to snares, like James and Rose, have learned to climb again. At feeding times several animals come scampering to rummage for honey-sprinkled delicacies stuffed into plastic balls and lengths of bamboo in stimulated games of hide-and-seek devised by the keepers.

"The bears come here, we patch them up, we look after them, we do our best to help them," Ms Hutton said as she watched a pair of young sun bears teasing treats out of football-size plastic balls with their long, limber tongues while lying on their backs and grunting delightedly. "They're happy here, but we shouldn't have places like this," she added. "These animals should all be in the wild, but there's no wild left."

Her charity's work focuses primarily on rehabilitating rescued animals, but its mission also includes the education of locals about the importance of wildlife protection. The Free the Bear Express, a large, brightly painted coach converted into a schoolroom on wheels, meanders around Cambodia's rutted, narrow dirt tracks going from hamlet to hamlet, bearing a conservationist message. The group is also engaged in economic projects for locals. It buys wild honey from subsistence farmers and provides them with the things they need in an attempt to wean them off poaching.

"Many locals are occupied with simply surviving, so animals are not a priority to them," explained Choun Vuthy, Free the Bears' local programme manager. "But they're slowly coming around to the view that wildlife protection is essential for their future."

"None of these bears had a hope," Mr Hunt said, standing inside a nursery with a pair of cubs clampering playfully on sturdy wooden climbers. One of them is "Baby Jesus", a newly rescued cub named in jest by his keepers because he's miraculously bounced back from death after suffering from a severe case of tick fever.

"Now they have a second chance at life." ■



LAIID-BACK: An Asiatic black bear rests in the shade of a tree at Free the Bear's sanctuary in Cambodia.