

Around the Campus



A tryst with the Bears

After a long yet fun week of travelling around Mysore and a short trip to Ooty, I was tired due to severe lack of sleep. This was my first trip to the South of India, and there was more to come in the following weeks. I absolutely love working with and for animals. The wild animals attract me all the more and so I decided to volunteer for a fortnight at the Wildlife SOS Bannerghatta Bear Rescue Centre near Bengaluru. Something, I planned beforehand, I landed in Bengaluru, and my time at the centre was full of learning and interacting with the sharp yet adorable sloth bears and a variety of people.

Housing 74 bears, 38 males and 40 females looking after these is more than just carrying out a day's work. One needs to be in sync with the animals. You cannot afford to be fearful and go on about doing the daily chores. At the same time, one needs to be careful as wild animals are known to be often unpredictable.

A usual day's work first comprised of feeding the bears. This would begin at 8:30 a.m. and extend up to 11:00 a.m. and involved collecting the feed and delivering to all the five enclosures, keeping it to cool and finally, feeding it to the bears. I was surprised to hear the slur sound the bears made while taking in their food. All in unison, it would sound like someone dragging iron sheets across a marble floor! The kitchen staff would actually begin work by 4-4:30 a.m. to make sure the large amount of food for the 74 bears would be properly cooked before being picked-up. After food, the enclosures would be cleaned meticulously with disinfectants as prescribed by the veterinarian, which are regularly changed every fortnight. An hour before lunch, there would be group tasks, which required the keepers as well as others to work together say for painting the walls or building the enrichments for the bears (wobble trees, hammocks, straw balls etc).

In the meantime, usually Srikanda Anna, the keeper, accompanied by a few others would drive around the safari offering and hiding fruits for the bears to encourage their natural foraging behaviour. It was a treat to see the fruit feeding as the bears would sprint towards the car and some would even play with Srikanda Anna, who seemed to have a way with these lovely animals. The animals would be given their second feeding with a slight change in their meal such as honey and eggs but without *Ragi* and relatively lighter than the morning meal. The bears are given a semi-liquid diet of *Jowar-Ragi* porridge mixed with feed additives, which are also regularly changed every 10-15 days as advised by the veterinarian.

As sloth bears are known to have a preference for termites and ants as food, the centre also provides them with nutritional enrichment, which includes mealworms, termite logs, groundnuts, and a whole range of other food stuff to pamper their sweet 'teeth' (coconuts, dates, sugarcane, honey etc.).

With most of the bears being rescued from *Kalandars* (a nomadic tribe known to use these bears for street shows), while I was working with and feeding them it kept recurring how we humans are willing to do anything for our survival- even overwrite ways of living for those innocent. We complain of human-animal conflict on one side whereas there couldn't be more signs implying that man is actually causing the conflict- penetrating into core animal habitats, degrading forested areas, uprooting denning sites of the gentle and shy animals, exploiting natural resources and destroying homes for the sake of 'development'. Looking at the '*karadi*' (sloth bear in kannada) interact with their keepers despite being ill-treated and mishandled before being rescued was overwhelming. It is important to understand that everyone has a right to live from the ant crawling next to you to the carnivores roaming the forests. A balance and practical approach is what we need, easier said than done it remains a question when we'll reach such a stage. My focus was mainly on the healthcare aspect of the bears out of mere interest and desire to pursue veterinary medicine in the near future. I was fortunate to have Dr. Arun A. Sha who designed an effective work schedule for me, which included most aspects of animal health and welfare.

With well maintained individual records for each bear, holding information from where and when it was rescued to treatments and general health check-ups carried out up to date was very impressive. In such a setting, I learned that it was important to always be prepared and keep things in order. This was well regulated by Dr. Arun and his colleagues with lists for all things possible. Lists for disinfectant usage instructions and dates for changing them for each enclosure, vaccination charts, de-worming, types of enrichment scheduled for each day and of course one for the Staff health screening and monitoring were put up on bulletin boards.

The small, concise yet well stocked wildlife veterinary clinic was a treat to visit. A bulletin displaying checklists for bear surgical procedures as well as for rescue operations and classes of medicines with their dosage was placed on one of the walls. Interesting new additions to a clinic I hadn't come across before were proper Dental radiograph facilities and the ultrasound scanning machine, all for the bears!

Health is an important aspect especially in captive animals as one cannot afford to let loose the contagious diseases like rabies, tuberculosis, parasitic infestations and other diseases. Interestingly, the sloth bears often require dental attention particularly tooth extractions and root canals as their canines are literally broken off by the *Kalandars* themselves without any medical care so as to keep them from injuring the 'care'-takers.



PRAGYA AISHWARYA LAMA

Apart from observing bear treatments, I also had the opportunity to read some and flip through some very interesting books collected by Dr. Sha over the years. Having a mini-library with books of your interest in the middle of a forest and reading outdoors in complete tranquillity sounds almost unbelievable. It was a pleasure reading and taking notes with the occasional Bengaluru breezes passing through.

During lunch hours, the veterinarians – Dr. Sha, Dr. Hari and Dr. Linto; the wildlife biologist – Dr. Swaminathan and I would have brief discussions on the role of ecologists, veterinarians and other professions in conservation. We would talk about people perceptions in our respective hometowns, experiences with free-ranging wildlife as well as future prospects. Not a moment I would say was wasted and should be when such resourceful, learned people, who are willing to share their thoughts are in the same room as you. Such people would also involve the likes of Srikanda Anna and Imam Ji, who have devoted themselves working for animals. Their practical experiences along with their abilities to multi-task despite lack of proper education could put some to shame. Their humble nature was just cherry on the top!

Wildlife conservation involves a multidisciplinary approach. Just studying veterinary medicine or expertise in field biology or any other field won't help achieve the goal of conservation. At the end of the day, we must remember the bigger picture, that nature – her flora and fauna are our priority. Working together and most importantly, sharing information and new findings will not only open new avenues for us (if that is all that one is worried about) but also help us save species faster and may be bring back some from the brink. Willingness to work together and keep learning is the key and only achievable, when we keep our egos locked up.

I would like to thank the entire Wildlife SOS crew for making my visit a fruitful and memorable one. I left with wonderful memories and hope to contribute to animal welfare and conservation in a bigger and better way in the days to come.

Pragya Aishwarya Lama

Smt. Manju Bishnoi

Smt. Manju Bishnoi, Personal Secretary to Director superannuated on May 31, 2014. She joined the Wildlife Institute of India on March 1, 1987. Before joining the WII, she also worked in other department of the Government of India for more than 10 years. A function was organised on May 30, 2014 to bid farewell to Smt. Bishnoi. She thanked everyone for all support and togetherness as a team on this occasion.

The WII family members wished her a happy and peaceful life in future.

Farewell...



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A Healthy Ecology is the Basis for a Healthy Economy.

Claudine Schneider
 U.S. Representative in *The Green Lifestyle Handbook*
 Source: <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Ecology>