



**DANIEL ALLEN**  
REPORTS FROM A  
LAOTIAN RESCUE  
CENTRE STRIVING TO  
SAVE AN ENDANGERED  
BEAR SPECIES

# BEAR The Essentials

Top, Asian black bears, or 'moon bears', are threatened from loss of habitat and the use of their organs in medicines. Unfortunately their ability to walk on their hind legs has also led to many cubs being taken from the wild to perform in circuses

CLEARLY WARY OF HUMANS, BINDI, A FIVE-MONTH-OLD Asiatic black bear, takes refuge in the darkest corner of her den as we enter the room. Found by Laotian traffic police crammed into a plastic pipe on the back of a motorbike, Bindi was severely traumatised when she arrived at Free the Bears Fund's Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre near Luang Prabang. As poachers most likely killed her mother, she was taken in by the dedicated centre staff and is now slowly recovering from her ordeal.

In Laos, a country still endowed with some of South-East Asia's greatest biodiversity, black bear numbers are sadly following the global trend towards extinction. Habitat loss due to logging,

human encroachment and all manner of infrastructure projects is a major problem, with poaching and illegal trading exerting ever-growing pressures on the remaining population. This makes the work of Free the Bears Fund all the more critical.

ประเทศไทยกล่าวได้ว่าเป็นแหล่งที่มีความหลากหลายทางชีวภาพมากที่สุดแห่งหนึ่งในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ทว่าจำนวนสัตว์ป่าอย่างหมิ่นดำกำลังลดจำนวนลงจนเกือบสูญพันธุ์ ด้วยผลจากการตัดไม้ทำลายป่า การบุกรุกของมนุษย์ รวมถึงโครงการสร้างสาธารณูปโภคอื่นๆ โครงการช่วยเหลือหมิ่นดำของกองทุน ฟรี เดอะ แบร์ส จึงมีความสำคัญอย่างยิ่งยวด

PHOTOS: CORBIS (THIS PAGE); DANIEL ALLEN (ALL OTHER PHOTOS)

Bindi and the other 15 bears currently housed at the Tat Kuang Si site share some idyllic surroundings. Less than 30 minutes by tuk-tuk south of Luang Prabang, the area is famed for its stunningly beautiful multi-tiered waterfalls, which tumble over smooth limestone formations into a series of deep, clear pools. It's a must-see on any visit to the area.

Walking to the main, jungle-enclosed bear compound along a path of viscous ochre mud, Jude Osborne, who has run the centre with his partner Jane Clegg since 2006, provides some background information.

"At the moment we're the only bear sanctuary in Laos," he explains. "All of the bears we look after arrived when they were very young. Their mothers were killed and they would probably have been trafficked out of the country for bile farming. They're too young to take care of themselves and would have certainly died if we'd released them back into the wild."

We arrive at the main compound just before the midday feed. Although the bears have been temporarily removed to their den, a diverse assortment of mewls, grunts and sniffs from inside suggest a growing impatience to begin dining.

Jane hands me a large tray, piled high with corn cobs, peanuts, melon slices and bananas, ready for distribution in the compound. "A mentally stimulated bear is a happy bear," she explains. "These are intelligent animals that would normally have to forage and hunt for food, so we try to make the feeding process challenging to encourage natural behaviour."

Head keeper Sumthone is renowned for his creativity when it comes to keeping bears actively searching for food. He proudly



Right, Tat Kuang Si Rescue Centre's Jude Osborne shares some quality time with one of his charges, a baby moon bear  
Below, lunch fit for a bear, ready to be 'hidden' around the compound

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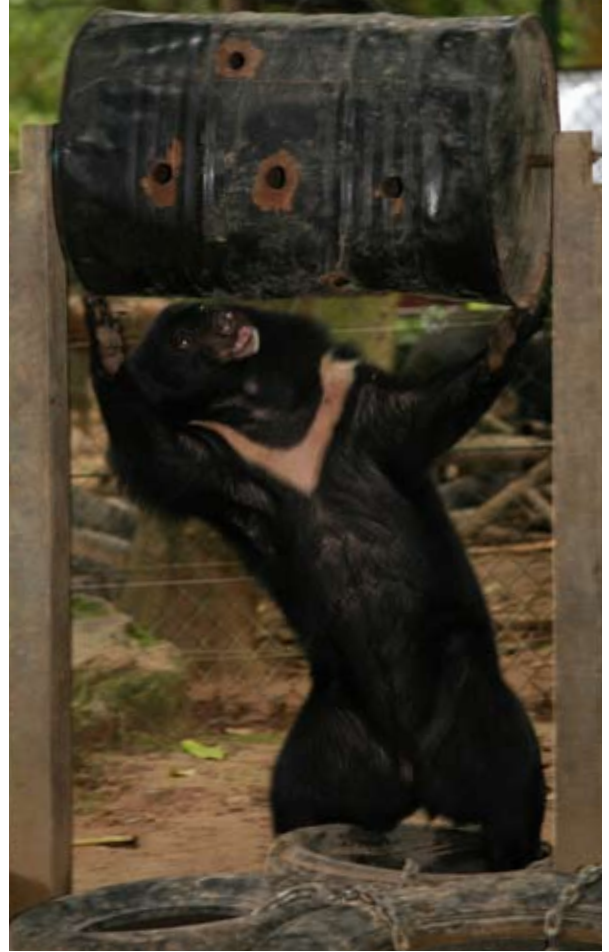
tells me that corn in bamboo logs, peanuts in plastic footballs and banana leaves in hammocks were all his brainchild. I'm quite pleased with myself when I cunningly conceal a stash of bananas on top of a high wooden platform, as is the large bear that climbs up there with ease a few minutes later and proceeds to gorge himself on my poorly hidden snack.

To assist full-time staff, Tat Kuang Si welcomes volunteers from around the world. They share the full range of daily duties and usually fall in love with both the bears and the centre's unspoiled local environment. Contributions from short-term volunteers help

หมิ่นน้อยบดินดีและเพื่อนอีก 15 ตัว ทางกองทุนได้ช่วยเหลือมา ตอนนี้อาศัยอยู่บริเวณน้ำตกตาดวงสี อันเป็นศูนย์ฟื้นฟูหมิ่นป่าแห่งเดียวในประเทศไทย คุณจุด ออสบอร์นผู้ดูแลศูนย์ตั้งแต่วันที่ พ.ศ. 2549 กล่าวว่า หมิ่นที่ศูนย์ดูแลอยู่นั้น แม่ของมันถูกฆ่า และเป็นไปได้ที่พวกมันจะนำลูกหมิ่นเหล่านี้ส่งออกไปยัง ฟาร์มหมิ่นที่อยู่นอกประเทศ

คุณแจน เครก ผู้ดูแลศูนย์อีกท่านหนึ่งเล่าว่า หมิ่นเป็น สัตว์ฉลาดและตามธรรมชาติแล้วต้องคอยหาอาหารเอง การให้อาหารหมิ่นที่ศูนย์จึงท้าทายความสามารถทางธรรมชาติ นี้ด้วยการนำอาหารไปซ่อนไว้ตามที่ต่างๆ

Right, these Laotian Black Bears are safe now, but until the Asian bear bile industry is eradicated, the same cannot be said for umpteen numbers of their kind



to cover operating costs, and all those involved admit it's a small price to pay for such a worthwhile experience.

Free the Bears Fund Inc. founded the Tat Kuang Si centre in 2003 after the rescue of three bears by local authorities. The Australia-based charity works to protect bears right across Asia, and has helped take more than 400 "dancing bears" off India's streets alone. With corporate sponsorship in Laos still very hard to come by, the fund currently relies on donations from the public and fundraising in Australia.

A limited budget is not the only challenge facing Tat Kuang Si. "Raising environmental awareness is a crucial part of saving wild bears in Laos," says Jude. "We need to educate as well as protect. It's our responsibility to raise the profile of these special animals, to highlight the dangerous position they're in, and to show what an essential part of Laotian wildlife they are."

Is there any chance the bears could be returned to their natural Laotian habitat? "In a perfect world we'd love to see all of these animals living in the wild," he says. "However, rehabilitation is a lengthy and expensive process, and not always in the best interests of every animal. We have to guarantee that they'll be safe and can sustain themselves, and that there's genetic compatibility with other bears in the area."

At the end of a richly rewarding day at Tat Kuang Si, I'm left with mixed feelings. When it comes to bear trafficking and bile farming,

the fact that humans can be capable of such acts of cruelty for the sake of quick profit is utterly depressing. Yet people like Jude, Jane and the great local keepers offer hope that the Asiatic black bear doesn't have to go the way of the Yangtze dolphin, Sumatran rhino and South China tiger.

With much-needed support from the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Department in Luang Prabang, and hopefully greater financial assistance from further afield, Tat Kuang Si's challenging yet invaluable work goes on. "Until we've stamped out bile farming and safeguarded Laotian black bears for good, our efforts will continue," says Jude. "Right now this beautiful animal needs all the help it can get." ■

ที่ศูนย์ต้อนรับอาสาสมัครจากทั่วโลกเพื่อช่วยทำงานดูแลหมีท่ามกลางธรรมชาติที่ถักถิ่นอันอุดมสมบูรณ์ จำนวนงบประมาณที่จำกัดไม่ใช่ความท้าทายอย่างเดียวในศูนย์อนุรักษ์แห่งนี้ การตระหนักถึงสิ่งแวดล้อมเป็นอีกเรื่องที่สำคัญในการอนุรักษ์หมีป่าในประเทศลาวในระยะยาว

แม้ว่าทางศูนย์อยากให้เห็นหมีเหล่านี้กลับไปอาศัยอยู่ในป่าอันเป็นบ้านของมัน แต่ก็ต้องแน่ใจด้วยว่าหมีของทางศูนย์จะปลอดภัยและสามารถเข้ากับหมีอื่นๆในป่าได้ พวกเขาจะทำงานเพื่อหมีเหล่านี้ต่อไปจนกว่าจะสามารถหยุดการทำฟาร์มหมีและปกป้องหมีดำเหล่านี้ได้อย่างถาวร

▶ HOW TO VISIT

Regular tuk-tuks to the Tat Kuang Si area leave from Luang Prabang town centre. For further information on the Tat Kuang Si Rescue Centre, visit [www.bearlao.com](http://www.bearlao.com) or email [bearlao@gmail.com](mailto:bearlao@gmail.com). For information on how to donate and volunteer, go to [www.freethebears.org.au](http://www.freethebears.org.au)



Bangkok Airways flies thrice daily between Bangkok and Luang Prabang (see Destination Guide on page 137). Visit [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)