

Largest Bear Sanctuary in the World Celebrates Fifth Birthday on Christmas Eve

The most successful bear rescue centre in the world marks its 5th Anniversary on Christmas Eve this year. The Agra Bear Rescue Facility (ABRF), a landmark collaborative project between Wildlife S.O.S and Uttar Pradesh Forest Department India gave shelter to the first rescued Dancing Bear on Christmas eve 2002 and today is a happy home for over 200 bears rescued from the horrendous dancing bear trade..

New Delhi, Delhi, IND, 2007-12-26 09:11:17 (IndiaPRwire.com)

The most successful bear rescue centre in the world marks its 5th Anniversary on Christmas Eve this year. The Agra Bear Rescue Facility (ABRF), a landmark collaborative project between Wildlife S.O.S and Uttar Pradesh Forest Department India gave shelter to the first rescued Dancing Bear on Christmas eve 2002. This was the beginning of bringing the ancient barbaric practice of Dancing Bears in India to an end.

The rescue center was conceptualised by Wildlife S.O.S (WSOS), an Indian NGO after a two year investigative survey into the issue of Dancing Bears in India. The center is run with support from its international partners i.e - International Animal Rescue (IAR), Free the Bears Inc. Australia, One Voice Association France and HSI Australia. Wildlife SOS have rescued over 420 bears till date. The Agra Bear Rescue Facility, a few kilometres from the Taj Mahal has today become the single largest such facility in the world for rescued Dancing Sloth Bears. Wildlife S.O.S has established other Bear Rescue centres in the states of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh & Karnataka in collaboration with state Forest Departments using the Agra Rescue Center as a model.

Christmas Eve 2007 marks a major milestone in the campaign to bring an end to the cruel practice of Dancing Bears in India. There are about 350 - 400 dancing bears still performing on the streets of India. Wildlife SOS is hopeful that this practice can be brought to an end completely by 2010.

Kartick Satyanarayan, Co-Founder of Wildlife S.O.S, said: 'The challenge of rescuing all the bears off the street seemed a humungous and impossible task. Most people were sceptical about a small NGO like WSOS would achieve this. Thanks to the support from the Indian Government and our international partners we have already reached the half way mark. The holistic approach we have taken in providing alternative livelihoods to the Kalandar community has a huge positive effect of the project'

Alan Knight OBE, CEO of International Animal Rescue, says: 'We have come a long way since Christmas Eve 2002. From humble beginnings five years ago the Agra Bear Rescue Facility has grown into a centre of excellence for the rescue and rehabilitation of dancing bears.'

DFO Agra - Shri S.P.Yadav, IFS said 'The Bear Rescue Centre at Agra now boasts of a state-of-the-art Wildlife Veterinary Clinic complete with a dental suite, operation theatres, radiology unit and a in house laboratory. Special environmental enrichment is provided to each and every bear based on its special needs to stimulate and amuse the bear's natural senses.'

Many Bears lose their eyesight through malnutrition or careless use of a whip or a stick by their Kalandar handlers.

Recently Wildlife S.O.S was felicitated with a special award from the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department for successfully removing all the dancing bears from the tourist routes around Agra and the historic city of Fatehpur Sikri. This image had haunted international tourists from time immemorial.

Life has turned a full circle for the six bears that came in on Christmas Eve five years ago. '*Bijli*' a young female Bear was terribly abused by her kalandar handlers and took over a year to get over her fear. She was under deep trauma when she arrived at the center. Today she is a picture of good health and a bundle of joy - one of the happiest bears with a glossy coat and a forgotten past.

Bijli's friend Lalloo still has the ugly scars on his nose where the rope had torn through his muzzle. His kalandar owner was very scared of him and held him tightly by a short rope right up till the minute when he handed him over. Lalloo's left eye had been gouged out by one of his former handlers - a scar that will never leave him.

Rani Bear has metamorphosed into a powerful female bear from the shivering underfed and malnourished bear she was when she arrived. She came weighing about 60 kilos and today weighs well over 150 kilos. Her past has left her suspicious of humans, yet she enjoys her freedom and spends every moment she can outside under the thick shrubs and trees digging for ants and termites.

Geeta Seshamani, Co-founder, Wildlife S.O.S concludes, 'On 24th December this year we will certainly celebrate the success of the Agra Bear Rescue Facility and of the campaign to rescue India's dancing Bears in general, but we won't forget the bears still on the streets this Christmas, and still in need of our help. We are lucky to have been given a 145-acre extension to the Agra Bear Rescue Facility by the Government recently. This gesture on part of the government vindicates their faith in the abilities of Wildlife S.O.S and the way we have gone about rescuing the bears and rehabilitating the Kalandar owners into humane alternative livelihoods.'

'We now have enough land at Agra and our other rescue centres to home the remaining 400 bears still awaiting to be rescued from the streets. We only have to develop that land to provide dens and water ponds and trees for the rescued bears, which we have faith in will happen soon. The biggest celebration will be when there are no more dancing bears in India because they are all safely in our care.' says Geeta.

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Wildlife S.O.S is an Indian Non-Governmental organisation working in the field of Wildlife rescue and Rehabilitation since 1995. Our main project is the rescue and rehabilitation of 'dancing bears', which are Indian Sloth Bears exploited by a gypsy tribe, called Kalandars for street entertainment purposes. In collaboration with the State Forest Departments, Wildlife S.O.S runs the World's largest Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre for Sloth Bears in Agra alongwith 3 other centres in Bhopal, Bangalore and Hyderabad. Working in tandem with the government law enforcement agencies, including state forest departments, Wildlife S.O.S has rescued around 400 Sloth bears from leading miserable lives with Kalandars and with the recent extension to the Agra Bear Rescue Facility, we hope to eradicate the profession of 'bear dancing' by rescuing the remaining around 500 bears off the Indian streets and rehabilitating the bear dancers as well, so that they and their generations to come don't revert to 'dancing or poaching bears' ever again. Join hands with us in

giving both man and animal a life of Dignity and Freedom!!! The Bear Rescue & Kalandar Rehabilitation Programs of Wildlife S.O.S are primarily funded by International Animal Rescue. Other international partners are Free the Bears Fund Inc - Australia, Humane Society International-Australia and One Voice Association, France.

For more, visit our website, www.wildlifesos.org

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