

Five Asiatic black bears return to the wild

The Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC) based in Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, has successfully rehabilitated five hand-reared Asiatic black bears into the wild. The bears, hand-raised at the CBRC in West Bank, Pakke Tiger Reserve, were taken to the remote release site (Upper Dikarai) within the reserve, September last year. Following their 'assisted release' over the months, the bears now survive on their own, being only remotely monitored with the help of radio-collars. CBRC, a joint venture of the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and its partner International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) was established to rescue and rehabilitate Asiatic black bear cubs.

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Within a year of the successful rehabilitation of two hand-reared Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), the Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC) has released another batch of five in Pakke Tiger Reserve in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The bears, hand-reared at the CBRC, were undergoing acclimatisation in the wild at Upper Dikarai since September last year.

Following the soft-release protocol known as "assisted release", the bears were taken for daily walks in the wild assisted by their caretaker or 'surrogate mother'. While the animals were encouraged to feed on their natural food, their diet was also supplemented with concentrate food at the deep forest camp where they spent the nights. Initially, the bears returned to their temporary enclosure for the night, but gradually they began to rest outdoors, indicating signs of independence. As the wild instinct took over, the bears detached themselves from their caretaker, and began exploring the forests on their own.

Says NVK Ashraf, director, Wild Rescue Programme of the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), "There are four crucial dates in any animal rehabilitation programme of this kind: their first walk in the wild, the first night they spent outside the enclosure, the first time they are left alone during the day and finally the day the walker stops accompanying them."

Tamo Dadda, field officer, WTI, based at CBRC recalled, "The bears had begun showing reluctance to return to the camp at night after a few months from their first walk. Since April 2008, all but one spent their nights outside their enclosure in the camp, choosing to rest on the trees as they do in the wild. During their walks they foraged on leaves, shoots of bamboo, wild fruits, barks of various tree species and termites."

"The five bears are not all of the same age and obviously not all became independent at the same time. Their release date was finalised only after we were satisfied that each one of them was capable of surviving on their own," said Ashraf.

The bears were radio-collared on June 24. Yaduraj Khadpekar, veterinarian, Mobile Veterinary Service (MVS) Arunachal Pradesh, said, "They are now being monitored by the keepers who are still at the camp. The bears have not returned to the camp but haven't ventured very far either."

"The radio-collars are fitted to provide six to eight months of post-release monitoring data. The collar

drops off by the eighth month, before it becomes too tight, by which time the bear is mature enough to survive on its own," added Ashraf.

Found in sub tropical and Himalayan forests (1200 to 3300 metres) along the Indian sub-continent, the Asiatic black bear is listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The species is threatened by habitat degradation, intense human-animal conflicts in northern India and hunting for food and for other cultural uses along the north-east Indian states. The bears are also endangered by poaching for their gall bladder used in extracting medicinal bile for Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The CBRC was established to rehabilitate Asiatic black bear cubs orphaned by poachers or rescued from villagers. This is a joint venture of the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and its partner, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW).

The CBRC situated on the western bank of Pakke River can hold up to 16 bears and provides temporary refuge for rescued cubs. Villagers in Arunachal Pradesh, unaware of the bear's conservation status, traditionally hunt it for its meat, skin and other body parts. There have been efforts to control this practice but it is still prevalent. Bear cubs are often taken home from the forest by villagers, to be kept as pets and handed over to the forest department when they become a liability, as they approach adulthood.

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Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), is a non-profit conservation organisation, committed to urgent action that prevents destruction of India's wildlife.

Its principal concerns are crisis management and the provision of quick, efficient aid to those areas that require it the most. In the longer term it hopes to achieve, through proactive reforms, an atmosphere conducive to conserving India's wildlife and its habitat.

Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) was formed in November 1998 in response to the rapidly deteriorating condition of wildlife in India. WTI is a registered charity in India (under Section 12A of the Income Tax Act, 1961). It has as its express purpose the provision of rapid aid to wildlife in times of crisis. To learn more about WTI, please log on to: www.wti.org.in

IFAW and WTI formed a partnership in 2000 to strengthen the cause of wildlife conservation and animal welfare in India. The two organizations share concerns for a number of endangered animals, including the Tibetan antelope. Through this collaboration, IFAW and WTI are developing strategies to find solutions to wildlife threats in India and the surrounding region.

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