



Xuan Xuan, a Moon Bear rescued from a bile farm by Animals Asia

What is bear bile farming?

Bear bile farming is the practice of extracting bile from a bear's gall bladder via a free-dripping hole and crudely inserted metal shunt punched into the abdomen. Animals Asia has rescued nearly 600 bears from bile farms across Asia. Their work will continue until the last bile farm closes its doors. The bile is used by some traditional Chinese medicine practitioners. Cruelty-free alternatives to the bile are available.

Under an Asian moon



Roger Bralow & Maria Slough

Carrying the pain of the recent passing of her dogs, Star and Melon, photographer and director Maria Slough returned to the China Bear Rescue Centre, Chengdu, home to bears rescued from the bile trade; but this time with her dogs' vet, Roger Bralow, to discover how dogs are helping to change lives across China...

When you arrive at the bear sanctuary, you cannot help but be swept up by the total peace that surrounds you. Set in 30 acres of countryside, the site is home to bears rescued from the bile trade.

These bears share their home with a handful of dogs and cats that have been rescued along the way by the dedicated team of workers and volunteers on site. Among these are dogs Muppet and To Zhai, both rescued from the dog meat trucks by Animals Asia founder and CEO Jill Robinson, and a very special Golden Retriever called Richter.

Richter was found in a pet shop in Ju Jan Yang during the 2008 earthquake. The Animals Asia volunteer team responded to the disaster, providing outreach help in the area. They took in many animals hurt or misplaced by the disaster, and with their own small animal hospital



Jill Robinson with Richter, rescued from the 2008 earthquake. Photo © Animals Asia

damaged by the earthquake, space was limited.

Veterinary nurse Wendy Leadbeater, who first came to Animals Asia in 2006 as a volunteer, told me how she took pity on Richter, who was placed in a pink wire cage in the hospital laundry. The frightened retriever pup refused to eat, so, on a temporary basis, she took him back to her room. As she



nursed him, Wendy found herself a new best friend and decided to adopt him.

She told me, "If I did not have the dogs, if I could not have any pets living on site with me, I don't think I would have stayed here so long. I need the dogs in my life as much as they need me. My room became a home when Richter moved in."

Animals Asia was originally

founded in 1998 to end the barbaric bear bile trade, which sees over 11,000 bears kept in tiny cages on bile farms across the continent. Animals Asia promotes compassion and respect for all animals and works to bring about long-term change.

The use of animal ambassadors, through the animal therapy programmes Dr Dog and Professor Paws, was

pioneered in 1991 by Animals Asia founder Jill Robinson and her gentle Golden Retriever, Dr Max. Dr Dog now has more than 1,000 canine consultants qualified as official Animals Asia animal therapy dogs, who make regular visits to hospitals, disabled centres, homes for the elderly, schools and orphanages.

Joining the Professor Paws team for the day, we made

the drive to the Experimental School attached to the Sichuan Normal University of Chengdu. From the moment we entered the classroom, it was obvious that we were watching change for the future. The children greeted us with a warm welcome in English and we watched as the Professor Paws cartoon presentation engaged its young audience. In Chinese



with English subtitles, the message is genius in its simplicity, teaching about kindness and compassion, and how to care for a companion animal. The children laughed at the humour and were excited about the presence of Asian celebrity Karen Mok, who is featured throughout.

The subject of the dog meat trade is dealt with head

on. The facts are presented through the sad tale of a cartoon dog who finds himself in a cage snatched from his home. This, coupled with a poster campaign that sees a set of chopsticks reaching for a family's dog, evoked a thoughtful silence from the classroom. One little boy brought his hands to his face; a girl at the far side of the

room stared in disbelief. There is no scaremongering here; just education and accurate information presented to a generation of children with an obvious thirst to learn.

After the children had a brief quiz on what they have just seen, Roger and I were then presented with a stunning collection of dog drawings from each child.

We made our way to the playground where three Professor Paws therapy dogs and their owners were waiting. The class was split into three groups and the children were taught to let the dogs sniff them. Many of the children had never had the chance to touch a dog, but by the end of the afternoon, fear and mistrust was gone, replaced with joy as the children stroked and held the dogs.

One volunteer told me, "I can see the changes happen because sometimes the children are afraid at first. Then we teach them some skills and encourage them to make friends with the dogs; they shake hands with my dog DouXiaoDou and even give her a hug. It is amazing to see."

There is great liberation in removing fear and replacing it with knowledge, and it is this empowerment that will enable the young generations not only to educate their



elders, but to rebirth a nation moving forward in its attitudes to animal welfare and compassion.

As Roger and I said goodbye to the moon bears, cats and dogs that had been our companions all week, I was mindful of how much work is yet to be done to achieve the Animals Asia vision to end cruelty

and restore respect for all animals across Asia. Yet the memory of one boy whose young face gave way to an old soul stayed with me...

In class he came up to me and held my hand. He returned to his desk, but kept watching me. A few minutes later, he was back and wrapped his arms around my waist. In the playground

he showed the therapy dog the same unconditional love. In that moment, I was overwhelmed with a hope for change within the great nation of China; by learning about love from the dogs themselves, this young generation really can bring about the compassionate change so needed towards animals and, in turn, people. ✳



✳ To support the work of Animals Asia, visit www.animalsasia.org

✳ With thanks to The Olsen Animal Trust, David M and Calumet Photographic for their support in facilitating this trip

From the Home Counties to Chengdu...



Vet Roger Bralow shares his experiences of educating Chinese youngsters about the joys of dog ownership

We walked through the markets in a tiny village outside Chengdu not far from the China Bear Rescue Centre. The vibrant colours

of the spices on display and the beautiful fruits and vegetables made me remember I was quite far from my local Sainsbury's.

We were invited by

Animals Asia into a primary school in urban Chengdu. Visiting schools is something that I do in the UK from time to time and the contrast was amazing. Out of a class

of 44 in China, only a few owned dogs. You can't really compare this to suburban Surrey where the morning school run has anywhere from 3 to 15 dogs coming in with the parents. When I last spoke at my children's primary school to a class of 30, 19 owned dogs.

We watched the Professor Paws presentation, which covered the facts about dog ownership. They did it well – really well. They taught the basics and the responsibilities of how to treat a dog, what his essential needs are, how to approach dogs, not to yell at them or abuse them; that there is a responsibility that involves caring, some expenses and cleaning up mess.

This might seem basic, but I feel in the UK we have become complacent about dog ownership. Most people feel they know best, but in my experience, 50 per cent of what I have to deal with as a vet could have been avoided. Educating the

young when their minds are sponges for facts is the way forward. Let them absorb information and develop their own responsibilities.

Worlds apart

The very matter-of-fact segment about the dog meat trade was a stark reminder that I had left the Home Counties. The facts about dogs from this trade having been stolen from caring homes, or poisoned street dogs, kept in horrific conditions, triggered some very emotional responses from these impressionable children.

During the Professor Paws class some of the children got to touch a dog for the first time. The first time! This was amazing to witness. I got to observe the faces of these kids change from fear to curiosity to confidence and eventually we could just see the nose of the therapy dog poking through a sea of happy children.

I have been a vet for



20 years and am currently working towards my cardiology certificate. Back at the China Bear Rescue Centre, there was a bear that the head vet, Emily Drayton, asked me to help with, as she suspected heart disease. The equipment was amazing and the team was caring and efficient. We scanned the

heart together and discussed several cases. I have always enjoyed being a vet, but times like this remind me of why I started vet school all those years ago.

Whether you are a small animal surgeon in Surrey, or saving the bears from bile farms in China, there is a plethora of reasons to be a

vet, but for me it is the bond between human and animal that keeps us going. ✳

✳ Roger Bralow is a partner at Vets4Pets in Richmond-upon-Thames, Surrey, with certificates in surgery and small animal practice