“I’ve just lost three beautiful friends.”

- Dr Katrina Warren

For me, the last 12 months has in many ways been a terrible time.

Just this year I lost my best friend Toby, the beautiful dog with whom I spent 14 wonderful years of my life; and only months before, I also lost my gorgeous cat Milly. They say these things happen in threes and that’s true for me too. The other friend I lost late last year was Franzi… the little Moon Bear I first met during my visit to Animals Asia’s sanctuary in China in 2005.

As a valued supporter of Animals Asia, I’m sure you’ve heard about this sweet little bear that had stress dwarfism as a result of spending 25 years trapped in a tiny cage. Yet she lived her remaining years in the company of her own beautiful friend – a big bear with brain damage called Rupert – in their own ‘secret garden’, exploring, playing, snuggling up to sleep together and being looked after by caring people from Animals Asia who loved them both.

I shed tears when I heard about Franzi… and I’ve done a lot more crying since. (Sadly Rupert, who was one of the very first bears rescued by Animals Asia, has now gone too. He passed away in June after 10 wonderful years at the Sanctuary.)

But while I am deeply distressed by the passing of these beautiful animals, I keep telling myself how important it is to remember that my own pets lived incredible, full lives. And in Franzi’s case, as with the hundreds of other bears rescued by Animals Asia from the bear farms of China and Vietnam, they were able to spend their latter years surrounded by love, free from the cramped cages in which they’d previously suffered and with their dignity restored.

That's why I became an Ambassador for Animals Asia five years ago… and why I will always support them. I know at times it must seem to you that progress in the campaign to end bear bile farming is intolerably slow – imagine how Jill Robinson and her team must feel.

They’ve been campaigning and saving bears for over 12 years now (the 8th of August marks Animals Asia’s 12th anniversary), and they’ve attended many, many funerals for the victims of the bile trade in that time – beautiful bears who became their friends but who died, even after rescue, due to the torturous lives they’d previously had forced upon them.

I’ve attended these funerals… and I’ve seen the tears rolling down Jill’s face and those shed by the amazing vets and local bear workers who dedicate their lives to helping these stunning animals. They get to know each bear personally, their special traits; their personalities; their likes and dislikes; their individual behaviour (and sometimes misbehaviour). Each loss is another stab to their huge and loving hearts… Andrew… Assisi… Franzi… Matt… Raspberry… Rupert… Shui … the circumstances of those bears’ lives are the legacy of a trade that has no conscience and should shame every bear farmer in Asia.

But each loss also motivates the Animals Asia team further to continue saving lives. The bears who’ve been with them for years in the wonderfully secure sanctuaries in China and Vietnam are testimony to Animals Asia’s incredible work… and so too is the progress they have achieved and which continues to take place with your help.

...more over...
For example, just last year Australian supporters donated funds to build a new ‘cubby house’ for the smallest bears rescued by Animals Asia in Vietnam that were not yet ready to integrate with full grown adults. Construction is due to start soon and this purpose built facility, with age (and size) appropriate enrichment will mean the chances of those cubs now leading long and healthy lives will improve dramatically.

And just a few years back when the call went out for a new bear house in China, our caring Support Groups across Australia rose to the challenge and enabled us to house another 24 rescued bears – we’ve named it the Australian Bear Paradise and our flag now adorns one of its walls for all to see.

Animals Asia continues to develop relationships with government officials, lawyers, academics and the public to generate support for and encourage the development of animal welfare legislation. As a result, the Animal Protection Law Research Centre has opened in Shaanxi – a first for China... and proposals are now being drawn up for a national animal welfare law. This is a long-term process, but one that Animals Asia is convinced will eventually reap rewards.

On April 19 this year, 10 more bears were rescued from Shandong Province’s last bile farm. As a result, Shandong became the 20th province now bear-farm free. So more than half of China is now free of the bile industry and committed to staying that way. That’s an area that represents 7.1 per cent of China’s entire land mass and 52 per cent of the population, leaving only 11 provinces still housing bear farms. According to official figures, the number of bear farms in China has dropped from 480 in the mid-1990s to just 68 today.

These are encouraging figures, but sadly, due to breeding on these farms and continued illegal trapping in the wild, Animals Asia believes that the actual number of bears on farms in China has probably increased and continues to grow. There is still much work to be done by the wonderful organisation we both support... but as Jill Robinson said recently:

“We have never been more hopeful of seeing the last Chinese bear farm close as this vision spreads into other provinces one by one. The time will come when bear bile usage is a distant memory and Moon Bears are accorded the same protection and respect as their endangered cousins, the pandas.”

This is the phenomenal work that you are helping to make happen from right here in Australia. And despite what you may have heard, Animals Asia is the only organisation actually rescuing bears in China. Please let J&A and her team know that as long as they don’t give up the fight, we won’t give up on them.

Right now, you can continue your support of Animals Asia, safe in the knowledge that your tax-deductible gift really will help to rescue more bears like Franz and allow them to spend the rest of their lives being loved and looked after by people who really care. If you’re able to sponsor a bear for just $47 per month, that would be incredible... but anything you can afford to give will be put straight to work. And you know that when you give to Animals Asia, your money goes directly to the cause. Simply complete and return the accompanying donation form today.

Thank you again for all that you are doing. Your generosity is genuinely appreciated.

Yours gratefully,

Dr Katrina Warren
Ambassador
Animals Asia Foundation

PS. You may have noticed that we’re honouring Franz in a new TV commercial (www.animalsasia.org/drkatrina) screening on many Australian networks. Keep your eye out for the commercial and proudly tell your friends that this is the organisation you support. Hopefully they’ll take your lead and come on board too, so we can help Animals Asia to bring an end to bear farming once and for all... and I won’t lose any more of my animal friends for many years. Please, send your donation today.

PPS. On an even brighter note, I have an update on that beautiful old bear called Oliver who was rescued by Animals Asia earlier this year. Oliver had survived 30 years on a bear farm - 15 of those years strapped into a medieval metal jacket. He would have died on the way back to the Rescue Centre if our vets had not been on hand to perform emergency surgery in a car park to save his life.

Oliver is now out and about in a den and doing really well. He’s set to live the remainder of his life surrounded by love. We know his time with Animals Asia will be relatively short, but just as Franz and my own Milly and Toby were spoiled with care in their twilight years, we want Oliver to receive that same extra TLC... and the additional medicines and dietary supplements he’ll require and maybe even further surgeries and rehab. Please help us make this possible by giving to this appeal.