Remembering the Ghost Bear & Rescuing the Moon Bears

July 14, 2012

Her photo is one of two that hangs above my desk. I am haunted to this day, only a month since the incident, but I know I will be haunted for the rest of my life. I let her down somehow—the world let her down.

The two pictures that hang behind my desk are of "Taquka" and "Shaguyik"—two young Kodiak bears that lost their mothers and then lost each other.



KODIAK BROWN BEAR SHAGUYIK (PHOTO BY JORDAN SCHAUL)

They were supposed to travel to Sweden together to their permanent home. The plan was for them to be lifelong companions serving as ambassadors for their subspecies at the Orsa *Bearpark* and carnivore conservation center north of Stockholm.

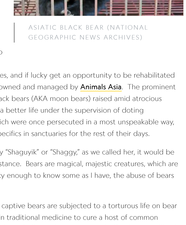
My colleague, Steve Mendive, and I accompanied "Taquka" for part of the young bear's trip to Europe. Hopefully "Shaguyik" rests in peace. She was fatally shot in a claimed Defense of Life or Property (DLP Regulation) killing. In Alaska, the statute dictates that one may kill a bear in defense of life or property, as long as an attack was unprovoked or a not a result of negligence.

Both bears came to us as cubs at nine months of age. They were orphaned when their mothers were shot and killed in another claim of DLP on Kodiak Island.

I won't pass judgement on the killings. I wasn't there. All I know is that "Shaguyik" who escaped from the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center in March was killed just across the highway from the wildlife campus last month. Perhaps she had never gone far. Perhaps she was making her way back. We'll never know. What is for certain is that negative human-bear conflicts persist around the world and here at home.

Ironically, "Shaguyik" is an eskimo name for "ghost" or "shadow" and I certainly feel that she is watching me from above. It is hard not to get sentimental. I am deeply saddened by the loss of "Shaggy." Among the few that handled her, I knew her most intimately. I met her plane at the airport when she arrived as a fifty pound furry ball of fire right out of the wild. I also wrote a eulogy for this beautiful 2 year old bear. My colleagues and I felt compelled to commemorate her and bring closure to such a sad story for those of us who cared so deeply for her. We felt obligated to pay our respect to Shaggy and so many other bears who needlessly died as result of human-bear conflict or perceived human-bear conflict.

I was hopeful that as a scientist turned journalist, I could inspire people to be more cognizant of the issues facing our natural world. I was hopeful that I could enlighten our readership about some of the more misunderstood species on our planet. But it has become quite a challenge, especially when conflict in my very own neck of the woods was resolved as it was, in such an unfortunate way, and a preventable way.



TAQUKA, SHAGUYIK, AND JORDAN SCHAUL (PHOTO BY DOUG LINDSTRAND)

In an effort to console me, a friend suggested that I could choose to live in the past and brood over the unfairness and injustice of the events that transpired or I could continue to try to make a difference for the millions of other animals suffering from human torture or disregard and negligence. I wish to help end the needless suffering of animals whether they are free-living wild animals or companion animals under human care.

Obviously we are still plagued with problems here in North America when it comes to human-bear interactions. It is hard to believe that a bear was killed in Chugach National Forest in the proximity of two natural history education centers where teaching people to coexist with bears is of paramount concern.

Learning to be "Bear Aware" is one thing you can do to keep bears wild and people safe. Please read one of my earlier posts on "Bear Awareness." I hope it provides some insight and encourages people to take some preventive measures that may save a bear from being unnecessarily dispatched (euthanized).

Human-bear conflict ranges from the more benign, negative human-bear interactions that occur often as a result of blatant human ignorance like feeding wild black bears to the more extreme forms of animal abuse. Some of these practices that seem beyond reproach have become acceptable and ingrained in Eastern cultures over many years. Dancing bears in India and bear bile farming in China immediately come to mind.



ASIATIC BLACK BEAR (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC NEWS ARCHIVES)

Bile farmed bears never get a chance to live with dignity much less a life of freedom. Instead they exist in tiny cages, and if lucky get an opportunity to be rehabilitated at bear sanctuaries, some of which are owned and managed by Animals Asia. The prominent rescue organization, removes Asiatic black bears (AKA moon bears) raised amid atrocious conditions and gives them a chance at a better life under the supervision of doting caregivers. These rehabbed bears, which were once persecuted in a most unspeakable way, are given a chance to live among conspecifics in sanctuaries for the rest of their days.

If there is one way that I can do right by "Shaguyik" or "Shaggy," as we called her, it would be to help other bears in dire need of assistance. Bears are magical, majestic creatures, which are often so misunderstood. If you are lucky enough to know some as I have, the abuse of bears anywhere seems so unconscionable.

Indeed, across the Pacific, thousands of captive bears are subjected to a torturous life on bear farms. Their bile is extracted and used in traditional medicine to cure a host of common illnesses that plague humans. Although there is little evidence demonstrating the benefits of bear bile as an effective medicinal agent for treating ailments ranging from headaches to haemorrhoids, bile continues to be collected.

The mental anguish and physical pain that these sentient beings suffer is unacceptable and yet the practice persists. The bears are confined in "crush" cages to small pens. Some of these holding facilities permit movement and others like the "crush" cages preclude the animals from even turning around.

Animals Asia has rescued and rehabilitated hundreds of bears of the thousands that have been subjected to these barbaric practices. Read more about the organization's ongoing effort to end the bile farming of bears. <click here>

The next post also addresses bile bear farming.

In Wildlife

Tags Jordan Carlton Schaul



MEET THE AUTHOR

With training in wildlife ecology, conservation medicine and comparative psychology, Dr. Schaul's contributions to Nat Geo Voices have covered a range of environmental and social topics. He draws particular attention to the plight of imperiled species highlighting issues at the juncture or nexus of sorta stu wildlife conservation and applied animal welfare. Sorta stu conservation practices are comprised of scientific management and stewardship of animal populations ex situ (in captivity / 'in human care') and in situ (free-ranging / 'in nature'). He also has a background in behavior management and training of companion animals and captive wildlife, as well as conservation marketing and digital publicity. Jordan has shared interviews with colleagues and public figures, as well as editorial news content. In addition, he has posted narratives describing his own work, which include the following examples: • Restoration of wood bison to the Interior of Alaska while (While Animal Curator at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and courtesy professor at the University of Alaska) • Rehabilitation of orphaned sloth bears exploited for tourists in South Asia (While executive consultant 'in-residence' at the Agra Bear Rescue Center managed by Wildlife SOS) • Censusing small wild cat (e.g. ocelot and margay) populations in the montane cloud forests of Costa Rica for popular publications with 'The Cat Whisperer' Mieshelle Nagelschneider • Evaluating the impact of ecotourism on marine mammal population stability and welfare off the coast of Mexico's Sea of Cortez (With Boston University's marine science program) Jordan was a director on boards of non-profit wildlife conservation organizations serving nations in Africa, North and South America and Southeast Asia. He is also a consultant to a human-wildlife conflict mitigation organization in the Pacific Northwest. Following animal curatorships in Alaska and California, he served as a charter board member of a zoo advocacy and outreach organization and later as its executive director. Jordan was a member of the Communication and Education Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (CEC-IUCN) and the Bear Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (BSG-SSC-IUCN). He has served on the advisory council of the National Wildlife Humane Society and in service to the Bear Taxon Advisory Group of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA Bear TAG). In addition he was an ex officio member of council of the International Association for Bear Research and Management. Contact Email: jordan@jordanschaul.com http://www.facebook.com/jordan.schaul https://www.linkedin.com/in/jordanschaul/ www.jordanschaul.com www.bicoastalreputationmanagement.com

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