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News Release

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Disfigured bear cub saved by expert vet team after mystery illness

A bear has been given a new lease of life after vets operated to remove its tongue, which was so swollen it had been dragging along the floor.

The bear – called Nyan htoo, which means ‘bright’ – was rescued as a cub along with its brother by a monastery in Myanmar. The pair had been destined for illegal sale in China before monks stepped in to save them.

Soon after their rescue, it became clear that Nyan htoo was suffering from an unknown disease that caused his tongue to become monstrously enlarged.

Vets first operated on Nyan htoo in 2016 in an attempt to remove the excess tissue. Despite making a good initial recovery, however, the swelling recurred and worsened over time.

By June 2017, it became clear the disease was now affecting Nyan htoo’s quality of life. While he was still able to play and wrestle with his brother, his tongue dragged around on the floor. It was continually being injured against his teeth and causing him to rest his head on his cage bars to support the additional weight.

Animal welfare expert and veterinary surgeon Heather Bacon, of the University of Edinburgh’s Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, worked with Caroline Nelson, a veterinary nurse at the Animals Asia Bear Rescue Centre in Vietnam.

They were joined by Romain Pizzi from Wildlife Surgery International in preparing a plan to alleviate the animal’s suffering, with support from charities the Winton Foundation for the Welfare of Bears and Free the Bears.

The expert team travelled to Myanmar, working with local vets to carry out a tongue amputation. Three kilogrammes of tissue was removed in a procedure that lasted four hours in soaring temperatures.

After examination, the veterinary team believe the swelling may have been caused by a mosquito-transmitted infection called elephantiasis. The condition is common in people in Myanmar but has never been reported in bears.

The team says the young bear is recovering well and they expect he can go on to have a more normal quality of life.

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Heather Bacon, of the Jeanne Marchig International Centre for Animal Welfare Education at the University of Edinburgh's Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, said: "This was an opportunity for us to use our veterinary and animal welfare expertise to make a significant difference for a bear and the people who care for him. Thanks to the enthusiasm and compassion of all involved in this uniquely collaborative project, we have been able to make a tangible improvement in the quality of Nyan htoo's life, and hope to continue our work in Myanmar to promote improvements in animal welfare and veterinary training"

Caroline Nelson, Veterinary Nurse at Animals Asia's Vietnam Bear Rescue Centre, said: "This was a really unusual medical condition – never before seen in any species of bear – but we weren't about to give up on Nyan Htoo. We're delighted that we've been able to improve his quality of life. Now he will be able to eat much more comfortably, sleep in more natural positions and move more freely for the rest of his life."

The Jeanne Marchig International Centre for Animal Welfare Education is committed to improving the health and welfare of animals through education, training, research and promoting the role of veterinarians in protecting animal welfare. It also supports capacity building in animal welfare around the world.

For more information please contact:

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