

Animal Rescue: FOUR PAWS rescues 'President Bears' Leo and Melanka in Ukraine

After 14 years of captivity at presidential residence, a new life awaits them at BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr

Global animal welfare organisation FOUR PAWS has successfully rescued two brown bears from an unusual location in Ukraine and brought them to its BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr near Lviv in Western Ukraine on 22 September. 'President Bears' Leo and Melanka have spent 14 years in small concrete enclosures at the president residence of Syniogora in the village of Huta, southeast of Lviv. Multiple Ukrainian presidents have visited the residence for meetings, holiday retreats or hunting, and have witnessed the cruel keeping. Following years of tireless efforts and negotiations with the authorities, FOUR PAWS will now protect the two bears from further suffering. However, an estimated 80 bears still live in cruel captivity across the Ukraine, most of them as visitor attractions near restaurants and in circuses and up to 20 on hunting stations. FOUR PAWS prompts the responsible authorities to effectively enforce its existing laws against cruel bear keeping across the country.

According to the authorities, Leo and Melanka were found exhausted and alone as cubs in 2006, before the authorities relocated them to the president residence of Syniogora. They were kept in a small, dirty enclosure, without any vegetation or activities to engage their natural behaviours. In addition to the lack of any stimulus the food and water containers were filthy. Both bears spent every day on concrete floors, without protection from the sun or rain. The authorities rejected and delayed FOUR PAWS' rescue attempts multiple times over the last few years, before it was finally approved following tireless efforts and public pressure. On 22 September, a FOUR PAWS team made the four-hour journey from BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr to Huta to free them from these cruel conditions.

"Leo and Melanka have arrived safely at their new home. They were vaccinated and chipped before departure and will receive a thorough medical examination once they have settled in. As a result of the poor conditions they have been kept in and lack of enrichment, both bears are showing stereotypical behaviour. Now they are being given time to rest and will receive all the care they need after the years of neglect they had to endure," says Ihor Nykolyn, Site Manager at BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr.

Uncontrolled breeding and illegal bear baiting in Ukraine

The private keeping of bears was forbidden by law in Ukraine in 2011 unless the owner has official permission from the authorities and keeps the bears in conditions that meet their biological and individual needs. However, due to a severe lack of enforcement, bears are still traded and bred without any oversight.

"Melanka gave birth multiple times in the past. Unfortunately, we do not know the whereabouts of those bears and cannot rule out the possibility that they might have even ended up at hunting stations as baiting bears to train hunting dogs. Sadly, bears in Ukraine continue to suffer because the law is neither enforced effectively nor appropriate punishments administered," says Nykolyn.

Although the abuse of bears for baiting was banned in 2015, bears are still kept on hunting stations as pets. Whilst bear keeping on hunting stations remains legal, the bears are most likely still abused for illegal baiting activities.

19 rescued bears at species-appropriate sanctuary

BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr, run by FOUR PAWS, opened for visitors in October 2017. Including new arrivals Leo and Melanka, 19 bears rescued from catastrophic keeping conditions now live on the 10.5-hectare site. Once all construction work has been completed over the next few years, FOUR PAWS will provide space for up to 30 rescued bears.

With the construction of BEAR SANCTUARY Domazhyr, FOUR PAWS has created a species-appropriate home for rescued bears, helping the Ukrainian government to enforce the ban on keeping baiting bears in the country. In addition, the bear sanctuary provides a home for individual animals from other cruel and inappropriate forms of bear keeping as well.

Images of the bear rescue available on request.

About FOUR PAWS

FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Heli Dugler, the organisation advocates for a world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding. The sustainable campaigns and projects focus on animals used for textiles, stray dogs and cats as well as pets, farm animals and wild animals – such as bears, big cats, orangutans and elephants – kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones.

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