



VOLUNTOURISM AT WILDLIFE SOS INDIA

OPEN HEART, OPEN MIND

BY SARA DUBOIS, PhD, RPBIO

Travelling abroad to experience new cultures and view unique wildlife is my favourite way to spend a vacation. However, for many of us who work in the animal welfare and veterinary sectors, travelling to new countries that have different standards of care and values toward animals can remind us that our animal superpowers at home are limited when we are guests in other worlds. I travel to refill my wildlife and adventure batteries, but carrying as much compassion as we do can definitely add extra weight to the heart and mind.

Making a difference while travelling is possible. The range of volunteer opportunities for tourists has increased. Navigating the international choices to find ethical and humane voluntourism opportunities is another matter. Too often, well-intentioned animal-loving travellers are duped into paying for experiences that make them feel like they are helping, when in the shadows, animals suffer exploitation. Having managed a wildlife rehabilitation centre, I thought I knew how to make the right choice. Yet in 2007, after extensive online research and professional-sounding correspondence, a colleague and I travelled with a bag of medical supplies to a wildlife centre in Costa Rica only to find that this “member facility” of an international organization was a total scam. We left on day two of our two-week mission and took our medical supplies with us. No one there knew how to use them, and we were not allowed to.

Wildlife voluntourism’s dark side and the ever-increasing social media currency of wildlife selfies have blinded many travellers to the reality of animal suffering abroad. Investigations have revealed entire industries where tourists pay big money to bottle-feed lion cubs who are later used in canned hunts; “sanctuaries” where tourists scrub bathing elephants who are too exhausted to work that day in the elephant-riding industry; and

“rehabilitation” facilities where rescued animals are fed, hugged, and posed for photos, but never given a chance of a wild life.

Thankfully, professional wildlife rescue facilities exist, and promoting their work is critical to exposing the others. I am honoured to share the incredible work of Wildlife SOS India (wildlifesos.org) and the opportunity for veterinary professionals and others to contribute to their important mission.

I had always wanted to travel to India, not just to try every local cuisine, but also to experience its history and culture while gaining a better understanding of the lives of its people in a modernizing world. It took many years though to find the right moment and right purpose to go, as I had to prepare myself for the sights I couldn’t unsee and the animals I couldn’t help. The feeling of helplessness while on vacation is too familiar from having found many injured animals on past trips, and so now I research local rescue and veterinary contacts in advance.

Planning is important, but knowing when I can help and when I cannot is even more important. There are an estimated 35 million street dogs in India, and I met several hundred of them, some friendly and curious, others scared and sick, and many parasite ridden. A few packs at the sanctuary locations were even sterilized, vaccinated, and ear-tipped thanks to Wildlife SOS’s sister



PAGE 34 AND 35 LEFT TO RIGHT: Sara Dubois on an afternoon elephant walk. Dr. Khadpekar, Wildlife SOS's senior wildlife veterinary officer, applying a turmeric paste to an ailing elephant's feet. Nocturnal sloth bears snoozing in the daytime heat.

organization Friendicoes SECA (friendicoes.org). Tender moments between dogs and “their people,” whether villagers, kids, or a shopkeeper who feeds them at the end of the day, were heart-warming but rare compared to the sight of dogs eating garbage, running between vehicles, limping, licking wounds, begging, and just trying to survive. Although I’m current on my rabies vaccinations, a close veterinarian friend strongly reminded me, “no touching!” when I shared pictures of the dogs that welcome guests at the Taj Mahal. Every year more than 20,000 people in India die of rabies (36 per cent of rabies deaths worldwide). A shocking statistic, but when you are there, it is easy to see how this happens. Outside the major cities, basic services like water, sanitation, electricity, and health care are still daily struggles.

In the cities and villages, roving packs of dogs, cows, goats, pigs, working equines, and even roadside camels live among the organized chaos of bustling streets of semi-trucks, cars, tuk-tuks, motorbikes, rickshaws, and bikes in a sea of people, choreographed to the sound of honking all day and night. However, just like with our big cities, escaping to the sounds of nature helped to balance the experience with rare bird viewing at Keoladeo National Park, searching for elusive Ganges river dolphins in the National Chambal Sanctuary, and fulfilling childhood dreams seeing Bengal tigers on safari in Ranthambore National Park.

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Having met Wildlife SOS founders Geeta Seshamani and Kartick Satyanarayan at several conferences in Canada over the years, I knew of their groundbreaking work to end the cruel dancing bear industry while creating alternative livelihoods for the nomadic communities that depended on the exploitation of the sloth bears. They founded Wildlife SOS in 1995 to care for wildlife in distress and have since become one of the largest organizations in south Asia, with multiple facilities across the country providing rescue, rehabilitation, and sanctuary to hundreds of animals annually. Recent work has focused on rescuing working elephants, anti-poaching operations, conservation workshops, and campaigning against exploitative animal tourism, while engaging with local communities to make them part of the solution. Wildlife SOS staff are dedicated and experienced professionals and include several wildlife veterinary officers who lead animal care teams in rescue events and provide daily care oversight and medical treatments to both permanent sanctuary and temporary rehabilitation patients.

International veterinary and animal care professionals, students, and members of the public are welcome to volunteer with Wildlife SOS Agra Bear Rescue Facility and the Elephant Conservation and Care Centre located at different sites between the cities of Mathura and Agra in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The international volunteer program to participate in daily animal husbandry provides guest housing, food, and local transportation at a reasonable weekly fee that goes directly to support the organization's work. Placement options vary based on volunteer expertise, with opportunities for international veterinarians to work alongside local veterinary officers. The Agra Bear Rescue Facility located in a government forest sanctuary near Keetham Lake houses about 200 sloth bears in enclosure habitats on two sides of the Yamuna River, with outdoor kitchens for food prep, a small surgical suite, staff living areas, and education space. A 15-minute drive to the Elephant Conservation and Care Centre ends near a small village where shipping containers have been converted into kitchens, offices, an education space, and a café for day visitors. Habitats with pools and shade are home for the dozens of elephants who are taken out with caretakers and visitors for multiple daytime walks in the adjacent fields.

In November 2018, Wildlife SOS opened a state-of-the-art elephant hospital, the first in India. It has wireless digital radiological capabilities, ultrasound, laser therapy, an X-ray machine, an in-house pathology lab, and a medical hoist for comfortably lifting disabled elephants and moving them around the treatment area. There is also a digital weighing scale, a protected-contact elephant restraining device, a hydrotherapy pool, quarantine enclosures, and infrared cameras. All of this will enable regular check-ups as well as out-of-routine treatments, and it will enable Wildlife SOS to be a world leader in the field of elephant veterinary care and management. The veterinary team here is eager to have students and practising veterinarian professionals join them as they break new ground in elephant care and treatment protocols. This is a very specialized area that requires a unique approach. The team has much to share and is open to new ideas for developing standards of care.

If you have been waiting for the right time and a meaningful purpose to travel to India and help animals and local communities with an open heart and open mind, contact Wildlife SOS (volunteer@wildlifesos.org) for an incredible experience. This organization has an opportunity for every skill set. **WCV**