

Martín, A Bear Who Fought for His Freedom

In June of 1996 Mrs. Marjory Chiriboga was walking in the streets of Tena City, located in the Northeast of Ecuador, and immediately saw an Andean Bear cub of about 6 months old that was being sold for \$2000. Mrs. Chiriboga asked the military authorities for help and the cub was confiscated and taken to the Center for Animal Rescue Amazonico, located beside the Aguano River, Napo Province in the Amazon Region, which is directed by Mrs. Angelika Raiman. Martín escaped two times from the Rescue Center and survived for a couple of months in the jungle, but was finally found by the caretakers.

On the first of May, 1998, I went with Dr. Leonardo Arias to rescue Martín because the place where he was being kept was not the best place for the growth and development of an Andean Bear. When we arrived at the Rescue Center, we saw that while the bear appeared to be in good physical condition, he was very small for his age and was very tame, including playing like a dog with Remigo, Mrs. Raiman's husband. Martín's cage was very small and was shared with another animal, a Kinkaju or Cusumbo (*Potos flavus*). Mrs. Raiman agreed to hand over custody of the bear to us, and we advocated for his entry into a program of reintroduction. We took him by river and later by road to the Guayllabamba Zoo, where he lived while we got permission and built his rehabilitation cage on the Alto Choco Reserve, located in Intag, Imbabura Province, in the Northeast of Ecuador, and administered by Foundation Zoobreviven.

In June of 1998, INEFA, now the Ministry of the Environment, received a letter of complaint that Dr. Arias and I were trafficking Martín, so the permits were paralyzed. Martín was taken to the Baños Zoo, located in the Province of Tungurahua, where he was confined for more than 3 months in a cubicle which got no sunlight, but when the door was finally opened for Martín to go out into the main exhibition area he was afraid to leave.

On October 20, 1999, before the eventual eruption of the Volcano Tungurahua, Martín was released on the authority of the Ministry of the Environment to the reintroduction program being conducted at the Alto Choco Reserve under the auspices of the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA). In April of 2000, Martín and the other bears from the reintroduction program should have been liberated in the aforementioned reserve, but had to wait for the "psuedo-scientific" permit, but on the 5th of August of that year Martín and the other bear, wearing radio collars, escaped, making justice with their own paws.

A month after Martín's escape, the bear was scouting out our camp and was driven away by dogs, but they only managed to move him away for a couple of days, then we surprised him stealing foods in our refuge; we used a red pepper spray to scare him, but this did not restrain his impulse to get food. The constant incursions of the bear into our camp necessitated that we recapture him and take him to the high Andean forest. A few days later we got a letter of complaint that Martín entered a farm in search of food, so he was again captured and taken to a rehabilitation cage for a few months, and he was liberated again in December of 2000, but this time in a soft form, so he would have food daily with the hope that he would adapt gradually to the forest and not come near places where people are. For 8 months Martín visited his eating place regularly, but a time came when he stayed away longer each time and for weeks would not return to this eating place, in order to explore the forest.

In July of 2001, Martín entered a village near the Alto Choco Reserve, where the people lassoed him, hit him, and tied him in a metal shed. Here the bear, in his desperation to get free, bit the iron, breaking both his canines and splitting another. We rescued him and again returned him to the rehabilitation enclosure, where his pieces of teeth were treated by means of endodontics and reconstruction that were accomplished by a human dentist. Sadly without his canines Martín could not survive in the forest, so he could not be liberated again, and was taken to a zoo, but there were grave repercussions in his behavior because he was almost wild and he knew freedom, so we decided together with WSPA and the Ministry of the Environment to take him to one of the islets in the middle of Lake Cuicocha in the Ecological Reserve of Cotacachi-Cayapas. This relocation happened on August 28, 2001.

The islet that was Martín's home is 41 hectares, the terrain is rocky, irregular, and with small hills, trees of medium height, ferns, orchids, and the rest of the plants representative of the Cloud forest that had given Martín refuge, and some deer and ducks accompanied him. Tourists were not permitted to enter, though they could sometimes see him from a distance. Only people from the Ministry of the Environment disembarked daily to leave food for the bear, and they were sometimes surprised to see him swimming between the islets. With the relocation of Martín to the islets in Cuicocha, I thought his suffering and persecution had ended.

Nevertheless, on January 20, 2003 the bear escaped the islets by swimming approximately 300 meters because, I suppose, he went looking for a female to mate with. We again recaptured him on the 23rd of January and returned him to the islet, thinking that we could provide him a partner and he would not try to escape again. However, some people of the "Ecological" Municipality of Cotacachi, opposed to the entrance of a new bear to the islands, arguing that there should be an Environmental Impact Study because Martín's presence had supposedly caused a proliferation of rats that were causing "an ecological disaster" on the islands. Our arguments for a partner for Martín were in vain, and while we discussed it, Martín escaped for last time on March 9, 2003. He wore a radiocollar to help us locate him, but so far we have not been able to find it. We fear the worst may have happened to him.

The invasion and destruction of the habitat of the Andean Bear caused by the advance of agriculture and livestock has provoked conflict between farmers and bears. Generally these animals enter corn fields, where they are often shot. As a result of this conflict many cubs are orphaned, caught, and kept as pets or sold to private collections. This was Martín's first traumatic contact with humans. Only the effective and severe application of existing environmental laws can prevent more stories like that of Martín.

The lessons of Martín and the other liberated bears show that future efforts must concentrate on liberating animals in very extensive protected areas where there is no chance of encountering humans, or at least contact with humans is limited. Then this species of bear, when reintroduced, can walk freely in the forest and paramos where they have always belonged.