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A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH ANIMALS, NATURE AND EACH OTHER.

An Oasis for Bears in Romania

By Guest Post (<http://www.earthintransition.org/author/guest-post/>), February 3, 2016



(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/LiBearty-1-cristi-si-lidia-020216-1.jpg>) Guest Post: **Claudia Flisi** (<http://www.paroleanima.com>) visits the LiBearty sanctuary for orphaned and abused bears in Transylvania.

Did my guide know something I didn't? Adrian refused to accompany me inside the **LiBearty Sanctuary** (<http://bearsanctuary.com/libearty-bear-sanctuary>) outside of Zărnești in Brașov County, Transylvania. He knew about the work of the sanctuary of course; he is Romanian-born and a professional guide. But he demurred: "My heart is too soft so I cannot go with you. Please understand."

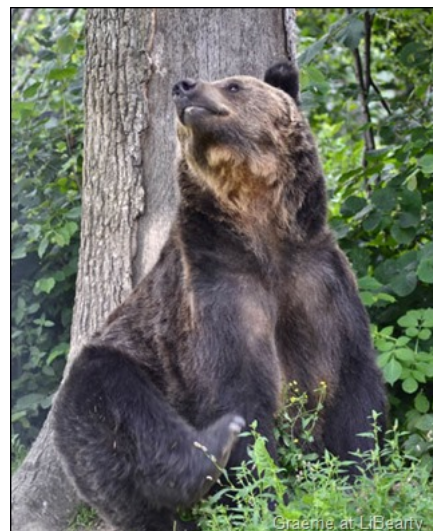
I did understand. Zărnești is in the heart of the Carpathian Mountains, the crossroads of monstrous myths. Yet the back stories of the sanctuary's shaggy residents are more unbelievable than Bram Stoker's tales of Transylvanian vampires. Deliberate blinding, forced alcoholism, involuntary drug addiction, and calculated maiming – not to mention orphans sold into slavery – are oft-told tales at LiBearty Sanctuary.

The 69-hectare reserve is the largest refuge for brown bears in the world in area and numbers. Since Romania hosts 60 percent of all wild brown bears in Europe (not counting Russia) and also is home to the largest remaining virgin forest on the continent, the location makes sense.

What doesn't make sense is how the bears have fared in their proximity to man. LiBearty's 80-some bears have suffered more cruelty and bestiality than the human mind can comprehend – never mind that humans alone have been responsible for such cruelty.

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/LiBearty-Graeme-020216-1.jpg>) Take **Graeme** for example. Graeme and his brother were orphaned by hunters in 1994. They killed the cubs' mother for sport, then locked up the two brothers in a small cage to serve as attractions for visitors to a mountain mining company. As mining declined, the growing cubs fought for what little food came their way, and Graeme was blinded in one eye. A zoo took him away to pace for years in a wire enclosure, while his brother was abandoned to starve to death in his tiny cage. Graeme came to LiBearty in 2013 and now, after 21 years of suffering, enjoys open spaces with trees, ponds, and grass, and an ursine companion from his zoo days.

Or **Max**. Born in 1997 and orphaned soon after, Max became a tourist attraction as a cub. He was



Graeme at LiBearty

chained near a castle in Sinaia so visitors could pay to have their pictures taken with him. To make sure he wouldn't cause problems as he grew, Max was deliberately blinded and his sharp canine teeth and claws were cut off. Pepper spray was sprayed into his nose to keep him from reacting to smells, and he was drugged every day with tranquilizers dissolved in beer.

LiBearty rescued him in 2006. They couldn't restore his sight, so they created a private acre-large enclosure for him, where he bathes in his own pool, hibernates in his own den, and spends his days enjoying the sun and the sounds of nature.

“Soon she began to recognize the sound of our car and would stand up to greet us when we arrived.”

Max's story, his expressive face, and his gentle demeanor move visitors more than those of any other resident of the sanctuary. When I mentioned seeing him to Adrian after my visit, he blanched. “I knew that bear. I would see him in Sinaia when he was still a cub. I knew something was wrong but there was no one to complain to, back then ...”

The fact that “there was no one to complain to” is what moved **Cristina Lapis** to create the sanctuary in the first place. A long-time animal activist, Lapis is a former journalist from the city of Braşov, about 30 km. northeast of Zărneşti. She and her husband Roger, France's honorary consul to Romania, established the Millions of Friends Association (AMP) in 1997, focusing on the rescue of stray dogs. It is the oldest animal welfare NGO in the country, and today looks after 700 dogs in two shelters.

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/LiBearty-Cristina-Lapis-020216-1.jpg>) Less than a year after starting AMP, Lapis encountered **Maya**. The young brown bear was in a small dirty cage near the tourist attraction of Bran Castle in Transylvania. She had no regular food, no care, no stimulation, only the jeering of tourists and the occasional beer bottle. Lapis recalls her “boundless rage against the people who could condemn such an animal to a slow and painful death like this.”

For the following four years, Lapis, her husband, and friends traveled 100 miles every day to bring food, water and companionship to the neglected bear. Results were initially promising: “We were able to improve her health and lift her spirits ... Soon she began to recognize the sound of our car and would stand up to greet us when we arrived.”

The problem was that Maya had nowhere to go. Zoos at that time were not an improvement in space or cleanliness. There were no shelters for large wild animals, and no money to maintain them, had they existed.

Maya became depressed again, as animals do in captivity. She self-mutilated her right paw, ripping her flesh to the bone. She lost her appetite and the will to live. She died literally in the arms of Cristina Lapis, as the latter rocked her and stroked her fur, on March 11, 2002. Over the bear's stiffening body, Lapis vowed that she would create a sanctuary for other bears so that they would not suffer a similar fate.

LiBearty Sanctuary opened its doors in 2006, the culmination of efforts by AMP and the World Society for the Protection of Animals, with the help of benefactors including the Brigitte Bardot Foundation and Vets United of Germany. That same year, the private ownership of brown bears taken from the wild was made illegal in Romania.

The town of Zărneşti gave AMP a 49-year lease on the 69 hectares, with the support of the then-mayor. The fortunes of the sanctuary depend on how the political wind blows at City Hall. Recently the breeze has been balmy, and LiBearty welcomed 21,000 visitors in 2014, its first full year of operation, with three or more tours a day. Almost half of the visitors are Romanian, either school children or tourists coming in July and August. The rest are a mixture, including British, Germans, French, Australians and Israelis, but very few Americans.





(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/LiBearty-group-020216-1.jpg>)

The tour begins with a video about the sanctuary and its founding. Extra tissues recommended, since there are pictures of the ill-starred Maya. Then a guide leads you from one enclosure to another, explaining the history of some of its occupants and information about brown bears in general and their role in nature. "We don't want people to see us as a zoo," insists Paula Ciotlos, a full-time staff member.

Several separate enclosures can accommodate animals with special needs. All are electrified with reinforced fencing, to keep the bears in and mal-intentioned intruders out. The current is enough to deter them.

They hope to visit schools everywhere in Romania.

Education is a core mission. Ignorance, cruelty and tradition have led to the bears' plight, and if future generations of Romanians are not educated, there won't be any bears left to protect. In 2012, sanctuary staff and volunteers visited every school in Brasov; eventually they hope to visit schools everywhere in

Romania. In 2014-15, they rolled out a yearlong program of study for 10- to 12-year-olds.

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/LiBearty-piscina-020216.jpg>) "This is the most receptive age for information about animals that can be effective in guiding their behavior," Ciotlos explains. "We are developing a textbook on the care of animals that the European Union is interested in funding, translating into English, and distributing throughout Europe. We think this would be the first welfare manual for animals in the EU."

In addition to education and community outreach, another constant focus of the sanctuary is fund-raising. The annual cost of feeding one bear alone is 5,000 euro, and there are currently 82 bears consuming more than 1.5 tons of food (and honey!) per day.



Donors are invited to "adopt (<http://www.ampbears.ro/en/adopt-a-bear>)" a bear or just donate (<http://www.ampbears.ro/en/donate>) for supplies.

What has happened to the bears in this country is a tragedy. But the bears of Zărnești are gorgeous, and so is the greenery surrounding them. In the wild, a Romanian brown bear survives about 25 years; at the sanctuary the average is about 35 years, and one bear lived to the age of 43. So one leaves feeling uplifted ... except for my guide Adrian, who still could not quite bear the experience.

More about the LiBearty Bear Sanctuary is **here** (<http://bearsanctuary.com/libearty-bear-sanctuary>).

*Cludia Flisi is a **freelance writer** (<http://www.paroleanima.com>) with wide expertise from business to fashion, along with her passion for animals.*



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