

BANU, MY FRIEND THE GENIUS COMEDIAN SUN BEAR

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— see the end of this essay for my statement on “Zoos & Captive Animals”



Malayan Sun Bears are the smallest species of bear in the world, with very small almond shaped eyes. Yet, like all sentient (thinking-feeling) animals, when you look deep into their pupils — with the eyes of your heart — you can see and get to know their *soul*. I was privileged to know one as a personal friend. His name was Banu and he was an ursine genius, an inventor, a prankster, and quite possibly the funniest animal I’ve ever known. Sun bears usually weigh only around 100–200 pounds. They’re compact, adorable, and astonishingly strong for their

size. But Banu was memorable for far more than just his strength.

Power in a Small Package

One evening, I was down the hallway preparing dinner—fruit, vegetables, and bear chow—when an explosive metallic crash echoed through the building. It sounded like someone had dropped a file cabinet onto concrete. I sprinted toward the noise and arrived just in time to witness something unbelievable.

Banu had apparently decided he wanted to visit his “girlfriend,” Byomi.

The two sun bears slept at night in neighboring indoor night dens separated by a massive sliding steel door that locked between them. Somehow, Banu had hooked his six-inch curved front claws into the metal door while bracing his rear paws against the cinder-block wall. With pure muscular force, he had already ripped heavy hinge bolts right through the concrete blocks and bent the thick metal door halfway downward.

For a bear barely larger than a big dog, the amount of power packed into his little body was shocking. But as impressive as his strength was, there were other moments when Banu displayed an intelligence that rivaled some primates.

An Ursine Inventor

One of his greatest “inventions” involved the water dispenser in his den, called a lixit (licks-it). Outside in their natural habitat yards, the bears had waterfalls and pools. Inside their individual night-time sleeping rooms, however, each animal the lixit to drink from. The lixit released tiny dribbles of water as the animal licked it.

We gave our bears plenty of yummy veggies and fruit. Yet for protein, a major part of their diet included hard processed bear pellets that looked a lot like very dry dog biscuits. We’d simply pour them through the feeding slot and let the pellets scatter across the floor. Surprisingly, the pellets weren’t bad tasting at all—yes, I sampled most of my animal friends’ food. Monkey chow was the best in my opinion.

Banu preferred his pellets soaked.

At first, he'd carefully gather every pellet into a neat pile beneath the lixit. Then he'd use one paw to hold the water spout open while using the other paw to stir the pellets around so they'd get wet. But patience was not one of Banu's defining virtues.

So, after many attempts and experiments, he developed a far more efficient method.

He discovered how to slap the lixit at exactly the right angle and force so it vibrated on its own, spraying water continuously for nearly twenty seconds. While the lixit rattled and sprayed, Banu happily used both paws to mix and soak his pellets into perfect bear oatmeal.

The amazing part? *None* of us human caretakers could duplicate what he did.

It became an ongoing challenge among the staff. We'd stand there smacking and flicking the lixit, trying to recreate Banu's technique, but none of us ever managed it. Only Banu knew the trick.

In fact, his little invention changed the way we cared for all the bears. Watching how much he preferred softened pellets made us realize the others probably did too. From then on, we began wetting the pellets before serving them to Byomi, Candra, and the other bears. Banu had effectively improved the menu for everyone.

But his engineering talents were only half the story.

A Natural Born Comedian

His intelligence—and his almost human sense of humor—became obvious through the elaborate pranks he loved pulling on both bears and people. He especially enjoyed performing for visiting reporters who were occasionally allowed behind the scenes into the feeding areas.

One of his favorite tricks was pure setup and timing.

He would stand upright against the wire grate of his night-den door and begin shaking it while repeatedly tilting his head backward in a motion that unmistakably seemed to say, *Come closer... closer...*

I'll admit we animal keepers sometimes encouraged the reporters by casually explaining,

"Banu has poor eyesight. He can only see you clearly if you get really close."

The moment an unsuspecting reporter leaned in just close enough, Banu would suddenly launch his astonishing twelve-inch honey tongue straight through the grate like a chameleon strike and drag it across the person's face in one giant slobbery bear lick.

The reporter would shriek and stumble backward, frantically wiping away the unexpected "bear kiss," while Banu practically collapsed with joy.

Since a bear's facial muscles can't produce many expressions beyond a subtle grin, Banu "laughed" with his entire body. His head swayed side to side, his shoulders rocked back and forth, and he radiated unmistakable delight like a child who had just executed the perfect practical joke.

Some old-school animal behavior scientists might object to calling that reaction "laughter." They prefer sterile phrases like "laugh-like vocalizations" or "play responses" to avoid anthropomorphism. But honestly, when something looks like laughter and makes everyone around it laugh too, it's hard to call it anything else.

Hide-And-Seek Bear Style

Banu's other favorite game was hide-and-seek.

The first time he pulled this stunt, he nearly gave me a heart attack.

I arrived early one morning to begin the routine of checking the animals before releasing them into their outdoor jungle habitats. As I unlocked the main human door to enter where all my animals' individual night-time rooms were, I was, as usual, greeted by the sound of my tiger friends, Akela and Rakshi. They said good morning every day with their powerfully deep ghostlike moans that vibrated the concrete walls. Their moans were then followed by affectionate "chuffing"—short bursts of vibrating air through their lips which was their way to ask me to rub and scratch their heads.

Everything seemed normal. But, then I reached Banu's den. It was *empty*.

Banu's doors were still locked and secure, but there was no Banu inside.

My stomach instantly dropped. Had he escaped somehow during the night? My mind raced through every possible disaster scenario.

Then suddenly a sound, and then a shadow coming from *above* at his ceiling.

I looked up.

There was Banu's face peeking down from the ceiling.

Apparently when he heard me enter the hallway and greet my tiger friends, Banu had somehow climbed all the way up to his heavy-duty metal grate protecting his overhead light fixture and had hooked all four paws into it so he could hang there silently waiting for me.

As soon as I saw him, his head started swaying back and forth — unmistakably bear laughing at my initial panic.

The instant I realized what had happened, I too burst out laughing.

Banu climbed back down, utterly pleased with himself, and casually collected his morning grapes like a comedian finishing a successful performance and collecting his

payment. After that day, he occasionally repeated his hide-and-seek routine just so we could share the joke together.

Hardened Human Hearts in Need of Healing

Now that you know a little about my old friend Banu's remarkable sun bear inner sentient soul, there's something heartbreaking you should also know.

Across parts of Asia, thousands of bears—including sun bears—are still subjected to horrific abuse for the extraction of their bile, a fluid produced in the liver and stored in the gallbladder. Some are captured from the wild, though many today are bred and confined on horrific bile farms where they endure repeated extractions throughout their entire lives.

Sometimes ketamine is used during the procedure. I knew ketamine well from veterinary medicine, where we used it compassionately to anesthetize animals before surgeries intended to heal and save them. But for bile bears, the drug is often used for the opposite purpose—not to help them, but to take from them. Even worse, many of these bears are restrained fully awake inside tiny “squeeze cages” or chained down while bile is extracted from their gallbladders again and again.

I won't describe the full process here. You can look it up and support groups that fight to get Asian countries to pass laws banning such practices. The good news is that much success is happening in the efforts to get laws that ban this passed in Asian countries where it's happening.

Compassion or Cruelty the Choice is Ours

Whenever I think about those enslaved Asian sun bears, I think of Banu—his ingenious inventions, his playful tricks, his loving laughter, and the joy he brought to those around him. He reminds me that creatures like him are not unfeeling objects or mere biological machines.

They are intelligent, emotional beings with *personalities*, relationships, humor, and lives that matter. Each one possesses a unique individuality—and in that sense, each is a “person.” Not a human person, but a person nonetheless, deserving compassion and protection rather than exploitation for profit by human predators.

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* **STATEMENT ON ZOOS & CAPTIVE ANIMALS** — Have you had *negative* feelings about zoos and captive animals? I empathize with you! If you research carefully, you will find that *good*, bad, and very ugly exists across the wide range of facilities and activities. When its bad and ugly, it's sadly easy to see — while the good and *wonderful* is often more subtle and behind the scenes. The best of facilities are motivated and designed around **compassion, conservation, and education**. Their animals are loved and protected by their caregiver keepers, and enjoy far better lives than those in the “wild” who must struggle and suffer violent competitive survival of the fittest, coolest, and cruelest, against predators, disease, drought, floods, fires, etc. Without captive animals, many species would otherwise go extinct. And the educational impact of new generations seeing, hearing, and caring about their local captive animal “friends” motivates actions to preserve and protect the world's natural habitats and inhabitants. For more, see: ***American Zoo: A Sociological Safari***, by sociologist David Grazian; and ***Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives***, by Thomas French.