

# Cherokee's Archaic Conditions for Caged Bears

Tucked away in the Qualla Boundary area of western North Carolina are three roadside zoos—Cherokee Bear Zoo, Chief Saunooke Bear Park, and Santa's Land—that keep bears in grossly inhumane conditions. As though locked in a 1950s time warp, these Cherokee facilities display neurotic, hungry bears in desolate concrete pits or cramped cages in which they pace back and forth, walk in endless circles, cry and whimper, and beg for tourists to toss them a morsel of food.

Bears are highly intelligent animals capable of empathy and a wide range of feelings, such as fear, joy, and playfulness. In their natural habitat, these curious and energetic animals are active for up to 18 hours per day and spend their time exploring diverse terrain, including tundra, alpine meadows, and forests; foraging for a wide variety of foods; and digging in soft earth, brush, and leaves. They seek shelter in hollow trees, caves, and under boulders.

When confined to barren enclosures without room to roam and with no opportunity to express natural behavior or make choices about their daily routines, bears quickly become stressed, frustrated, and bored. They often develop aberrant behavior. Stereotypic stress-induced behaviors—such as pacing, circling, head-tossing, and begging—are prominent in the captive-bear exhibits in Cherokee.

Despite all that is known today about the needs of captive bears, Cherokee's roadside zoos have made no effort to simulate the animals' natural habitat or provide stimulation. The cages lack any form of environmental enrichment, such as appropriate climbing structures, hidden food treats for foraging, barriers for privacy, and substrate for digging, resting, and nest-building.

## Concerned tourists routinely contact PETA with complaints, such as the following:

- “I was so upset with how sad these animals looked.” —Visitor from Louisiana
- “I cried when I left.” —Visitor from Tennessee
- “[The bears] have no life.” —Visitor from Georgia
- “I am deeply heartbroken about what I have seen.” —Visitor from South Carolina
- “This attraction is truly a disgrace to the town of Cherokee and its tourist offerings.” —Visitor from Illinois
- “[W]hat a sad life they live, with no access to grass, dirt, trees, woods, etc.” —Visitor from North Carolina

## Bear pits create an environment offering little sensory input

- Surrounded by four solid walls, the bears cannot scan the horizon, gain a perspective on their surroundings, or make much use of their acute sense of smell.
- Concrete, which absorbs and stores heat, exposes the bears to much higher surface and ambient temperatures in the scorching heat of summer than they would otherwise experience.
- Walking on a hard surface day after day can cause arthritis and skin and foot problems in captive animals.
- Pit-style exhibits offer poor ventilation and no opportunity to retreat from the public or other bears.
- The bears are enveloped by acoustically reflective surfaces, which can amplify loud, chronic, and repetitive noises—a source of both behavioral and physiological stress.

## Please *don't* feed the bears

- The public is encouraged to purchase food to feed to the bears.
- Instead of engaging in natural foraging behavior, hungry bears exhibit abnormal begging behavior.
- Unregulated public feeding prevents the bears from receiving a consistent diet, which can result

## Cherokee's Archaic Conditions for Caged Bears

in the overfeeding of some bears and the underfeeding of others.

- Feeding by the public instigates fighting among bears.
- Unsuitable food items provided by the public can cause illness and death. Chocolate and moldy nuts, for example, can be lethal to bears.
- Because the feeding regimen is partially visitor-dependent, seasonal and weather-related fluctuations in tourism can create unhealthy irregularities in the bears' food intake.

### **Bear experts express grave concerns about conditions at the Cherokee bear facilities, stating the following:**

- "The grotto-style accommodation ... fails completely to address the biological and behavioural needs of the bears." —Rob Laidlaw, chartered biologist, Zoocheck Canada
- "[T]he animal housing and care practices are woefully out of date, to the extent that welfare/well being is compromised." —Lorraine Smith, zoologist
- "Crying is not a behavior that one often sees in physically and mentally healthy bears." —Else Poulsen, bear specialist and author
- "The exhibit design and husbandry is poor at the Cherokee zoos, failing to satisfy [the bears'] most basic needs ...." —Mel Richardson, D.V.M., exotic-animal veterinarian

**Cherokee's roadside zoos fail to meet minimal federal standards established in the Animal Welfare Act and have received citations by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), including the following:**

- The USDA has cited Cherokee Bear Zoo repeatedly for failure to provide veterinary care to sick and underweight animals; failure to handle animals so that there is minimal risk of harm to the animal and to the public; failure to provide environmental enrichment to promote the psychological well-being of animals; improper feeding and watering, failure to maintain enclosures in good repair; inadequate drainage; and improper waste disposal.
- The USDA has cited Chief Saunooke Bear Park for numerous infractions, including failure to provide veterinary care to sick and extremely thin animals; filthy, unsanitary, and foul-smelling conditions; failure to provide food and water to hungry and thirsty animals; failure to maintain facilities in good repair; and failure to properly handle animals to prevent unsafe public contact.
- The USDA has cited Santa's Land Zoo repeatedly for failure to provide adequate veterinary care to sick, suffering, and dying animals; failure to provide shelter from inclement weather; failure to provide sufficient space; failure to handle animals so that there is minimal risk of harm to the animal and to public; and failure to properly maintain the cleanliness and structural soundness of enclosures. Santa's Land gets rid of unwanted bears by advertising "free" bears in a trade publication that caters to exotic-animal breeders and dealers, the pet trade, and hunting ranches.

### **What you can do**

- Never patronize facilities that keep captive wildlife in cruel conditions.
- Contact Cherokee officials and urge them to close the bear pits. Write to:

Principal Chief Michell Hicks  
The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians  
P.O. Box 455  
Cherokee, NC 28719  
828-497-7000