

## A Life in the Day: Jill Robinson, bear rescue

The founder and CEO of Animals Asia, Jill Robinson, MBE, 49, divides her time between her home in Hong Kong, where she has nine cats and six dogs, and the bear sanctuary that she founded in 2000, in Sichuan province, southwest China

I don't need an alarm. My internal clock wakes me up at 6.30 without fail. The view from my room at the sanctuary is beautiful. There's a river, and when the sun rises mist covers the area, over the yellow rape flowers and the bamboo forest.

I don't eat anything in the mornings. I'll grab some tea and go straight to my e-mails. My computer's the hub of Animals Asia, the foundation I set up in 1998 to help dogs, cats and bears in the region.

I work long hours — from as soon as I get up to eight or nine at night. But I have a lot of energy. You know the saying: we've got plenty of time to sleep when we're dead. Besides, the bears' needs never stop. We have 167, across 10 dens and 25 acres. When we started there was just a handful of us; now we've got over 150 people at the sanctuary, and another 40 or 50 across the globe. It sometimes frightens the life out of me that we have to commit to these bears for the 30 years of their life span.

When the den doors open at 9am, the scene is like a children's playground, as the bears burst out into the enclosures, alert and excited about what another day of freedom brings. All of them have been rescued from bile farms. Bear bile has been used in Chinese medicine for 3,000 years as a flu remedy, among other things. But farming bears only began in the 1980s. That meant keeping them in a small cage — no bigger than their body — and milking them every day for their bile, through a catheter protruding from their abdomen. It's an unconscionably cruel and unnecessary practice, as bile is easily synthesised in the lab.

Some Chinese officials are listening to us, and have helped to deliver bears to our sanctuary. But there are still 7,000 to 10,000 bears in bile farms. Every day is a roller coaster of emotions. The health checks are very hard. Death from infection is common among farmed bears, as is liver cancer. You can see the vet's eyebrows knit when she finds a shadow on the ultrasound. I normally deal with it by crying.

My relationship with these bears is a love affair. I can't understand how such an intelligent animal can turn around and forgive the same species that has caused them so much torture. They're creative, mischievous, energetic — although when they arrive, they're shells of themselves.

Jasper is my favourite. He's the peacemaker — welcoming new bears and breaking up fights. Jasper lived in a crush cage for 15 years — he was flattened, unable to stand. Most farmers will let the bears move a little, but Jasper's farmer couldn't be bothered. These people should be serving life sentences, as far as I'm concerned. But some bear farmers thank me. One came to us and broke down in tears, saying he would persuade his friends to stop bear-farming as well.

Lunch is fruit, or a fruit shake. I've been a vegetarian for 15 years. Working in animal welfare, I saw there was a good reason to stay away from meat, which is responsible for so many problems.

My afternoon is normally taken up with meetings and organisational matters. VIPs often visit, which is fun, as it gives me an excuse to show off the bears. Government officials come, as well as Chinese celebrities, such as Karen Mok, who is the Madonna of China, and help us fundraise and lobby. You should see their faces when I get them to put a finger in a dollop of peanut butter and offer it to Jasper. His tongue comes out about a foot. He would never bite.

I also write my daily blog, which I find terrifically absorbing. My most recent was about my visit to the live-animal markets in southern China, where I saw dogs and cats cruelly bludgeoned to death. Dogs and cats are routinely cooked in restaurants, skinned for fur, and used in traditional medicine. I can't understand it.

Many of my generation consider it bourgeois to talk about a love for animals while so many people are suffering. But I think you need to follow your heart. When I first opened the bear sanctuary in 2000, the Chinese staff would readily admit they thought westerners were crazy — kissing dogs, and spending money on bears. But now they get it, and they're great defenders of these animals. And things are changing. Thousands of people are helping us fight bear-farming.

I look forward to dinner. That's when I am finally able to switch off. We have a canteen that serves traditional regional food, which is hot and spicy. And chips are a favourite, cooked with herbs and spices, and pickled and garlic vegetables. There's also potato mud, the chef's translation of mashed potato.

I'm in bed by 10.30. Before falling asleep I might hear a roar, where someone has misbehaved, but it's usually bluff and settles down after a few seconds. I sleep like a baby, except when I've eaten MSG, which goes into a lot of Chinese food and affects many westerners badly. I know when I've eaten it because I have vivid, often violent, dreams. I'll wake up with a swollen face, feeling battered. Though the dreams aren't always bad.

[www.animalsasia.org](http://www.animalsasia.org)

Interview: Scott Athorne