

International Bear News

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A Karelain bear dog hazing a bear after release in Nevada. See article on page [23](#).

Photo credit: Carl Lackey



Tri-Annual Newsletter of the International Association
for Bear Research and Management (IBA)
and the IUCN/SSC Bear Specialist Group

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Editorial Policy

International Bear News welcomes articles about biology, conservation, and management of the world's eight bear species. Submissions of about 750 words are preferred, and photos, drawings, and charts are appreciated. Submissions to regional correspondents by email are preferred; otherwise, mail or fax to the address above. IBA reserves the right to accept, reject, and edit submissions.

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Consult website for submission guidelines. Deadline for the Spring issue is 05 February 2022.

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Bear Specialist Group

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Sloth bear: The Barefoot Bear of Sri Lanka

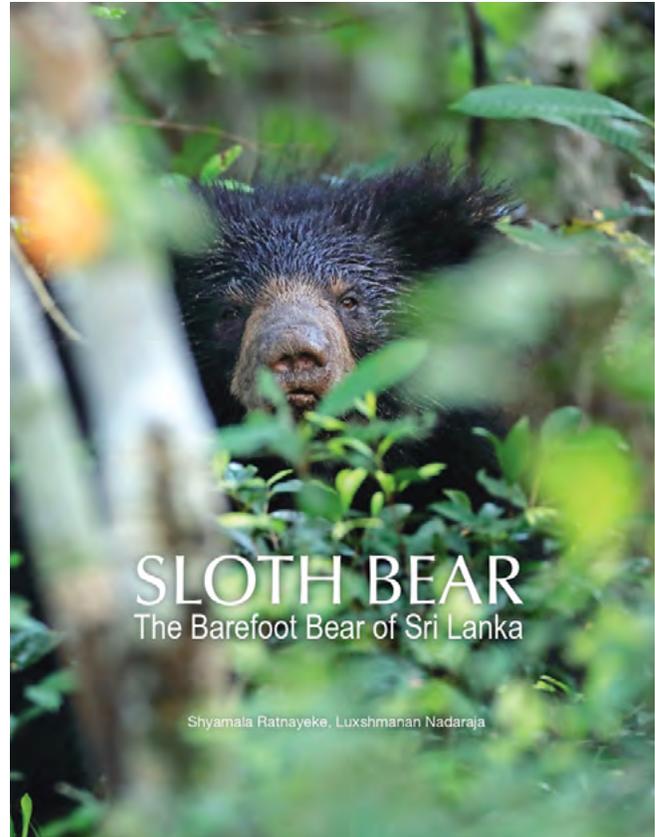
by Shyamala Ratnayake and Luxmanan Nadaraja

Sloth bears (*Melursus ursinus*) have long remained an enigma, even to those who live within their range. People who live with them both revere and fear sloth bears. In India, we grew up with stories of a mythological character named *Jambvanta*. Depicted as a sloth bear in ancient epics, *Jambvanta* helped *Ram*, and followed him to Sri Lanka in the quest to bring back his wife *Sita*. In the western world, sloth bears are a case of mistaken identity. Originally described as a true sloth due to its shaggy coat, big claws, and missing incisors, we now know that sloth bears are indeed bears with unique morphological characteristics that enable myrmecophagy. Despite the change in taxonomic classification, the common name stuck with them.

Dr. Shyamala Ratnayake and Luxshmanan Nadaraja's book *Sloth Bear- The Barefoot Bear of Sri Lanka* provides a splendid account of the ecology, conservation challenges, and future of this species in the island nation of Sri Lanka. Based on the first systematic scientific study conducted on sloth bears across its range in Sri Lanka, Dr. Ratnayake provides a first-hand account of her research findings, often synthesizing and contextualizing it in reference to other studies across the species range. Vibrant photos by Mr. Nadaraja accompany Dr. Ratanayake's jargon-free writing and make for an outstanding reading experience.

Throughout the book, Dr. Ratnayake weaves in backstories that never make it into a scientific article. Being sloth bear researchers ourselves, we have read all her papers on the species. Despite the previous readings, this book expanded the meaning and significance of her research. Through her captivating storytelling, she enlivens the triumphs and tribulations of being a wildlife biologist in the backcountry at a time when wildlife research was not a priority in Sri Lanka. Tales of malfunctioning arms, futile attempts at capturing animals, and DIY attempts to make things work in the field bring her research journey to life.

Two-page crossover pictures of bears and their habitat in the first few pages give the book the feel of a coffee-table book. A few pages down, we begin our journey with the barefoot bear. Divided into 6 chapters, this journey begins with an in-depth account of the comparative natural history of sloth bears across their entire range. Next, we read about the history of Sri Lankan forests, including the legacy of the 30-year civil war on the distribution of people, forests,



and sloth bears in the country. Dr. Ratnayake's pioneering work to map the island-wide historical, contemporary (circa 2004) and future (through 2015) distribution of bears is aided by detailed maps that help readers orient themselves and navigate through the geography and protected areas of Sri Lanka. Chapter 2 ends with a discussion of the local community's dependence on forest resources and their attitudes towards bears. In chapter 3, the focus shifts from country-wide surveys to detailed ecological studies of the bears in the Wasagamuwa National Park, where Dr. Ratnayake conducted research on the sloth bear's home range, diet, habitat use, and behavior. This chapter lays out the experiences and struggles Dr. Ratnayake had to face, figuring out bureaucracy and overcoming field difficulties, in pursuit of her quest to obtain a better understanding of the sloth bear.

Across the majority of their range, sloth bears co-occur with other charismatic species: tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) in India; leopards (*P. pardus kotiya*) and elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus*) in Sri Lanka. In chapter 4, Dr. Ratnayake asks how suitable sloth bears are as a conservation umbrella for other co-occurring species. She presents results from her camera trapping study where she observed several other carnivores where sloth bears are found, and posits

that sloth bears represent a variety of habitats and species assemblages, very different from that represented by elephants. The next chapter is not for the faint of heart! Sloth bears are among the most aggressive bear species, and highly feared by humans wherever there is an overlap. Human-bear conflict is a major driver of retribution killing and negative attitudes towards sloth bears. Equipped with poor vision and large claws, sloth bears are capable of causing serious and sometimes fatal injuries to people. This chapter presents interviews with bear-attack survivors along with insight into where, how and why sloth bear conflicts occur. The book concludes with an astute assessment of how human population growth, diminishing forests, and infrastructure are a challenge for wildlife conservation and the future of bears in Sri Lanka.

Wildlife research is considered an unconventional career choice in South Asia, even more so for women. Dr. Ratnakaye will undoubtedly inspire Sri Lankans and other South Asians to consider this profession through her candid presentation of the challenges and rewards of pursuing a career in wildlife research. This book is a testimony to perseverance and passion.

Sloth Bear: The Barefoot Bear of Sri Lanka makes the fascinating biology, ecology and challenges of conserving sloth bears accessible to a broad audience. In several sections of the book we were transported by the clear prose and photos to our field work on sloth bears in the dry forests of Central India. If anything, we were left longing to hear more of her personal story.

While the mythological king of bears, *Jambvanta*, is considered immortal, the future of his real life form, the sloth bear, remains uncertain.



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