



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

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Interview with Jill Robinson

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **JILL ROBINSON** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 199.*

JASMIN: We have Jill Robinson on our show today, and we had the honor of meeting Jill, who heads up Animals Asia, a few weeks ago when we were doing an event with them that was just wonderful. And Jill is an extraordinary human being, extraordinary. She's a perfect example of how one person can be pissed off and inspired at the same time to change the world for animals, and because of their passion, they create their own movement, really. And that's exactly what Jill has done, and I'm thrilled to be talking to Jill Robinson today about all the work she has been doing with Animals Asia. She is truly, truly a hero.

Jill Robinson has been a pioneer of animal welfare in Asia since 1985 and is widely recognized as the world's leading expert on the cruel bear bile industry, having campaigned against it since 1993. Born in the UK, Jill Robinson arrived in Hong Kong in 1985 and spent 12 years working in Asia as a consultant for the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Repeatedly faced with scenes of widespread animal cruelty, Jill founded Dr. Dog in Hong Kong in 1991, the first animal therapy program in Asia. This groundbreaking initiative introduced the concept of change through empathy, the belief that empathy for one animal can evolve into empathy for an entire species, and ultimately for all species. In 1993, a visit to a bear farm in southern China changed Jill's life, exposing the plight of endangered Asiatic black bears, also known as moon bears, cruelly farmed and milked for their bile. And learning how easily herbs and synthetics could replace bear bile, Jill embarked on a journey to end the practice of bear farming once and for all. In 1998, she founded Animals Asia, an organization that is devoted to ending the barbaric practice of bear bile farming and improving the welfare of animals in China and Vietnam by promoting compassion and respect for all animals, and working to bring about long-term change. Visit Animals Asia online at animalsasia.org.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Jill!

JILL: Hello! Nice to be here.

JASMIN: So exciting to have you. We finally got to meet you in person. You're such a role model to us, and we really enjoyed the concert a few weeks ago, the fundraiser "Bands for Bears" here in New York City. It was such a special evening.

JILL: Oh, wasn't it fun? And we were so grateful to you guys for emceeding. Thank you very, very much for that.

JASMIN: Oh, we were so honored to, really. We're big fans of Animals Asia and of the work you do. Before we hit record, you had mentioned to us where you were. So, can you tell all our listeners where you're speaking to us from?

JILL: I'm actually speaking from rural China. I'm on site with the bears and our fantastic team here, so excuse the sound level.

JASMIN: Well, I think it's really incredible that -- it's actually not only incredible that you're speaking to us from there, it's probably the most remote location we've had a guest on. But you're also in tomorrow already 'cause we have like a 12-hour difference, so I'm glad we were able to make this work. Let's just start by learning a little bit about Animals Asia. Where is Animals Asia located? And tell our listeners what issues you focus on.

JILL: Oh my goodness. Well, we were founded in 1998. When I first started the organization then, we had our head office in Hong Kong, but obviously we have two beautiful sanctuaries here in Chengdu in Szechuan province in China. And then we have another sanctuary in Tam Dao National Park, just outside of Hanoi in Vietnam. We have fantastic country offices of course as well, including the USA, you know, Morgan and Alice and the guys there. And then we have other offices in Australia, the UK, Germany, Italy.

JASMIN: That's a lot of places, a lot to keep track of! And I think it's incredible how you really started this just yourself out of a place of passion, and it's grown into such a huge undertaking!

MARIANN: And of course, the issue that I know that you started on was, though you work on a number of issues now, but still one of, definitely, the primary issues you work on is the bear bile trade. For those of our listeners who are unfamiliar, could you just give us the nutshell version, a glimpse of what the bear bile trade entails?

JILL: Yeah, absolutely. Bear bile farming began in the early '80s in China, from a practice that they learned from North Korea, where bears were kept in tiny wire cages implanted with metal catheters and also latex catheters and then literally milked of the bile from their gallbladders. The industry has just sort of snowballed ever since. And today, we are seeing at least 10,000 bears in China that are farmed under the most egregious conditions. Today there's a new method of bile extraction that they call the free drip fistula, which entails cutting a hole into the abdomen and gallbladder of these bears. And they say that's much, much better because the bears do not have a catheter procedure anymore, and of course it's exactly the same if not worse, because the hole is permanently open and permanently obviously a bacterial risk as well. And every single sample that we see of bile when we rescue these bears is just full of contaminants. In Vietnam as well there's about 2,400 bears that are farmed. And across the Asian continent, anything around 14,000 -- it could be much, much more, especially in China. The truth is we don't know because the farmers now know that this is a highly contentious issue and they are trying to sort of keep their industry very, very contained, away from the public eye.

JASMIN: Wow. I know that you're fighting the bear bile trade on many different fronts, and of course your sanctuaries are probably the most well-known of your campaigns. And we

want to talk about sanctuaries in a moment, but before we do, I'd really like to hear about the Healing without Harm campaign, which really seems to be going at the source of the problem.

JILL: Yes, exactly. Well, Healing Without Harm has been recognizing that working with traditional medicine doctors rather than against them is the key, one of the keys, to ending bear bile farming. It's very easy to point the finger and think that there's this sort of -- you know, that it's being driven by the doctors themselves, but actually bear bile farming is being driven by, in the most part, by the bear farmers, the bear bile farmers. Obviously they have a lot of these doctors in their camp, but actually we're working with thousands of doctors now across the country of China, in this program, as you say, Healing without Harm, which engages the more ethical doctors, who say very, very loudly and aggressively that we don't need bear bile in this day and age. It can easily and cheaply be replaced by herbal alternatives and of course by synthetic alternatives too. So, as of now, we've got, goodness, over 1,000 shops and pharmacies that have pledged not to prescribe or sell bear bile, and we've got about 2,000 individual doctors that have agreed the same. So, this is, again, another one of these snowball effects, where we're working with doctors that believe in our culture and the goal to end bear bile farming. As they say, keeping these bears in cages, milking of their bile, cannot possibly be in harmony with nature, which is the very sort of core of the philosophy of traditional Chinese medicine.

MARIANN: Yeah, I love that idea, and that's a really very moving concept, that you're reaching really further into the traditions of Chinese medicine. But returning to the sanctuaries and one of which you are at now, can you tell us about how the bears do once they arrive? I know that often they are very, very ill.

JILL: We frankly call them our broken bears when they come here. I think it's beyond anyone's comprehension, the sort of things that we see when they arrive in their cages from these farms. For a start, they could have been incarcerated for anything up to 30 years of their life, where they've literally grown into the cage bars and have the scars and wounds to prove it. Because of the psychological stress during this time, they've engaged in repetitive bar biting, so they've smashed a lot of their teeth during the process and also rubbed their heads against the bars repetitively to cause massive wounds on their faces. And we've even got one bear that's lost his nose cartilage because he just frantically rubbed his face so aggressively against the cages. They have claws that have grown right through their paw pads because they can't wear them down as they would in the wild. Sometimes the farmers deliberately cut the teeth back to gum level to take away their defenses and make them easier to milk, and they actually cut their paw tips away to stop the claws from growing. Some of the bears are blind because of the poor nutrition on the farms, a lack of Vitamin E, for example, and also the trauma, again, of banging their heads against the cages. And of course, worst of all is that they've got these awful, awful infected abdomens where they've been surgically mutilated on the farms to either implant the catheters or create these holes to milk their bile.

So, again, you can imagine all that. We always say as a team, we just put our emotions aside when those bears come in, and just try to be the professionals that the bears need us to be, and those next few hours and days and weeks as we are triaging them, giving them health checks, prioritizing them for major abdominal surgery, is really, really full-on. I can't overemphasize that. Everyone works as a fantastic team in both China and Vietnam just to

try to save as many lives as we can and get those bears ultimately out into our grassy enclosures, where they can start behaving like a bear for the first time in their lives.

JASMIN: Let's focus on one particular bear, Jasper, since he was the subject of your children's book, *Jasper's Story: Saving Moon Bears*. What is Jasper's story and how's he doing?

JILL: Oh, he's just, he's a beautiful bear. He arrived in 2000, October 2000, and he had been flattened to the bars of his cage in what we call a crush cage, for 15 years of his life. And yet even at that point, he was just the sweetest bear and he wasn't sort of lashing out in aggression as most of the other bears understandably were. We removed his metal catheter, which was about six inches long, from his abdomen, tidied up his smashed teeth, you know, removed the remnants, and then began to release him into a den and out in the enclosure. Today, 13 years later, we call Jasper the peacemaker. He makes friends with new bears that come in. He breaks up fights and disagreements that we sometimes get in the enclosure. He literally puts his body between any bear that's having a bit of an argument with another bear. And he's just earned himself the title of an ambassador. He's just a beautiful, beautiful bear.

MARIANN: Aw, that's so nice to hear. I know that we did see some of your bears because we saw the documentary, *Cages of Shame*, which is really a terrific movie that I recommend to anyone who is interested in this issue, or even if you're not interested, 'cause you will be interested. Is the movie currently available for screenings?

JILL: Yes, it is. For private screenings, please just by all means contact our US office, the team will be able to help you there. I think you've got the details for the US office. And you're right. It is a fantastic film of about, I think, 45 minutes, that really just encapsulates the whole industry, but not in a way that's going to make people turn away. We obviously recognize that anything too gruesome is not going to achieve our objectives of ending bear farming and having people join us. So, please watch it, and please, please just join with Animals Asia and see what a difference we can all make together in giving these bears their dignity back for the first time in their lives, and showing how a country's public is rising up against the industry of bear farming in both China and in Vietnam.

JASMIN: Jill, what's your personal story? How did you end up working to save animals, and how did you end up doing it in Asia?

JILL: Oh, goodness. Well, I'd always loved animals from when I was a little girl, and I think -- I was brought up for some time by my auntie, my sister and I, who always said that I used to go steaming across the main road to try and stoke a dog or a cat. So, it's almost been inherent in me, in some way, and I was lucky enough to then move to Hong Kong in my 20s with my then-husband who was an airline pilot. And I immediately met someone that worked for IFAW, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, and I began working for them. And I worked very happily with them for about 12 years. I walked onto a bear farm in 1993, and just -- astonished, just so crushed by what I saw on that farm, and it just changed everything about my life, particularly one bear that reached out through a cage and touched my shoulder, and we held paw to hand for several seconds, in a move that was so eminently stupid on my part. I would never do that today, not even to Jasper. They can be unpredictable. Even in play, they can be unpredictable, and they're massively strong of course. But this bear just squeezed my fingers, and I never saw her again, but as I said she

changed the course of my life. And I began Animals Asia as a result of really that one bear and the practice of bear farming and that's where we are today.

MARIANN: That's an extraordinary story. You mentioned before that people are rising up against this. And we've heard a lot of stories of late about a growing animal welfare movement in China. Can you speak to that?

JILL: Oh, thank you so much for asking that question. I think many of your listeners are listening incredulously that I can be talking so optimistically about China. It's true to say, when I began in the 80s, there was one animal welfare group. Now there's over 100, and my goodness, this is a movement here. Animal welfare wasn't even a name or two words before that were recognized, and now it just drips off everybody's tongues with ease. These are groups that are out there demonstrating in the streets, they're doing lobbying programs with the government. They have rescue centers for dogs and cats. They're confiscating dogs and cats from these awful trucks that are on their way to the live animal markets. They're involved in public education programs. We have conferences where we all join together in the same room and talk about the problems and solutions. I cannot speak highly enough of these amazing, amazing people in China who are getting this job done.

JASMIN: That's so amazing to hear. I can't even tell you how good that is to hear. What's the status of performing animals in China? We've heard some horror stories about the kinds of shows that go into zoos and elsewhere. Is there any progress on this front?

JILL: There is huge progress, and you know what? Please let me suggest that you have our Animal Welfare Director, Dave Neale, on, because that in itself would take up another whole program, and it's such an exciting project now that Dave and his team are working on. Again, we've seen enough live animal performances to make us sick to the bottom of our stomach, but things are once again beginning to change in China. There are various regulations that prevent this from happening now, even though, yes admittedly we know it still goes on in many zoos and safari parks across the country, but equally there are many that are stopping it as well and doing surveys of the public to recognize that not only is public attendance -- is staying the same; it's actually increasing as a result of not having these animal performances at the zoos. So, we're able in our capacity to be going out and doing training programs with zoo directors and zoo staff, in enrichment, in enhancing the lives of the animals in their enclosures, working with the state of enrichment, various groups from across the world, including obviously the USA, to be able to again enhance the lives of animals that lived such pitiful existence in their previous lives.

MARIANN: One of the issues that people tend to focus on in thinking about animal welfare is the one you mentioned before, and that's the dog-eating and cat-eating. And of course, we're deeply horrified by the dog trade and the stuff you hear is just terrible, though we're kind of uncomfortable focusing on it with the assumption that people will just eat pigs or chickens instead. Can you tell us what's going on with the fight to end the dog trade, and is anyone addressing it from a vegan perspective?

JILL: Yeah, we have been working on this for a long time. I think one of the things that we, Animals Asia believes, that is if we can make a convincing argument for ending the trade in dogs and cats, companion animals that have earned the right perhaps to be called our best friends, especially dogs, that help humankind across the world, then we can begin to show that actually other animals in intensive farming practices are equally intelligent and equally

deserving of our respect. This is the method behind our campaigns at Animals Asia. What we're able to show and have been able to since we first launched something called Dr. Dog in 1991, is again, how much dogs can assist, companion animals, can assist the community in any country across the world. And these are dogs that go into hospitals, disabled centers, homes for the blind and the elderly and the deaf, etc. And this is now operating in seven countries across Asia, with over 1,000 dogs that have joined the program over these years.

Again, we're also working with local groups in China across the country. There's banner adverts about the consumption of dogs and cats, conferences that we're having which talk about the legal aspects of confiscating these dogs where the media are invited to come along and advise these young activists in the country. It's a whole new world, something that I have been just so excited over the last couple of years. I can't say I never believed it would happen. I always did, but I'm just astonished with the -- ah, how can I say it? -- the way that it's escalating so, so much now. It's fantastic. As I said, it's a movement here. But again, I'm a vegan, and many of us are in Animals Asia, not all of us, but many of us. And again, we absolutely are spreading this concept again through the animal welfare programs as well. Individual animals in the intensive farming industry deserve the respect as much as companion animals like cats and dogs.

JASMIN: Absolutely. I know that China has really embraced factory farming, and it has a strong presence there now. Given all of the food scandals that have come out of China in recent years and the growth of heart disease and other western diseases, is there a growing awareness of some of the dangers of factory farming?

JILL: There really is. There really, really is. And there are, believe it or not, some vegans here in the country as well. In fact, you're calling us right in the middle of our Vegan Week here on site. We have about 180 staff here; most of them are Chinese. We give everybody of course the option between vegetarian and meat products, and we're getting sort of more and more people are joining the vegetarian queue, I am very pleased to say. We're still light-years away. It has to be recognized that we couldn't get a lot of our Chinese staff to be here consistently. It's a growing movement here, as it has been in the West, and we've got to take this a little bit cautiously. But what I can say is the Vegan Week here has been fantastically successful and we're hoping to have many, many more of them. We're also doing a lot of public education programs with our own staff of course, in a drive to show the reality of the intensive farming industry, and we're doing more outreach programs as well through our Animal Welfare Department, and Dave, I'd love you again to have on your program.

JASMIN: We'd love to have him. That would be great.

MARIANN: It's really exciting to hear that, and it's just so tragic that the moment really has passed -- you know, I can remember, having been doing this kind of work for a while, when the worry was that China would come on strong in factory farming, and the idea was that it had to be fought. Well, that moment has passed, and of course, factory farming has become huge there, but let's hope that it can be turned around so that China doesn't end up just going down the same route that the western world has gone in the way it raises animals. And you can see it with the prevalence of the diseases caused by animal agriculture.

JILL: Absolutely. It's just hideous and there's no less usage of antibiotics, believe you me, here in China. In fact, there probably could be more, I would say, as well. But again, don't lose sight of the fact that these local groups are really, really out there getting things done. They were the ones that actually were responsible for preventing a foie gras factory from opening up in Beijing. They lobbied against it.

MARIANN: That's great.

JILL: And the seal industry, where the seal parts are being exported from Canada, after the seal cull there, they lobbied against that too, also the American rodeo. So, they're trying to actually prevent foreign issues that really concern them in terms of animal welfare coming into China. We shouldn't lose sight of that too, that we should be responsible actually for some of our practices in the West, and luckily some Chinese groups are trying to stop that too.

MARIANN: Yeah, that's great to hear. It's really heartening to hear about everything that's going on there, and it sounds like you're doing amazing work. Tell us what the next steps are for Animals Asia.

JILL: Well, we're still obviously very, very aggressively working on the bear farming industry, and this coming few months, especially leading up to November, we've got a lot of exciting things happening in terms of press releases and things I can't really talk about. But let's face it, this strategy of ours in ending bear farming in both China and Vietnam has over 70 components to it. So, it's not just rescuing bears, it's out there again on public education, working with the media, celebrities, academics, Chinese medicine doctors, etc. etc. So, it's a busy, busy time, but again, what I want to emphasize is the sheer debts of support that we're getting now from the public here in China, in fact to the extent that last year it was within the top 10 most discussed issues in the country, so that is how we're particularly excited, the fact that the issue now is becoming something that the public is debating.

JASMIN: It's just, this is all giving me so much hope, and it's so exciting to hear all of the movement that is going on there because of Animals Asia and so many of the activists out there. And we can't thank you enough Jill, truly. It's been so eye-opening to hear about these campaigns, and we'd love to have your colleague on. We'll email about details, and we hope that you'll join us again in the future to keep us up to speed on the incredibly life-saving work of Animals Asia. And thank you for being out there doing the work you do. It's just so remarkable to know about all that you do to change the world for animals. Thank you, Jill.

JILL: Well, thank you so much. Come and see us one day.

JASMIN: Yes, definitely.

That was Jill Robinson. Learn more at animalsasia.org.