

Old age overtakes an ages old tradition

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **75 (2009)**

Heft [5]

PDF erstellt am: **25.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944476>

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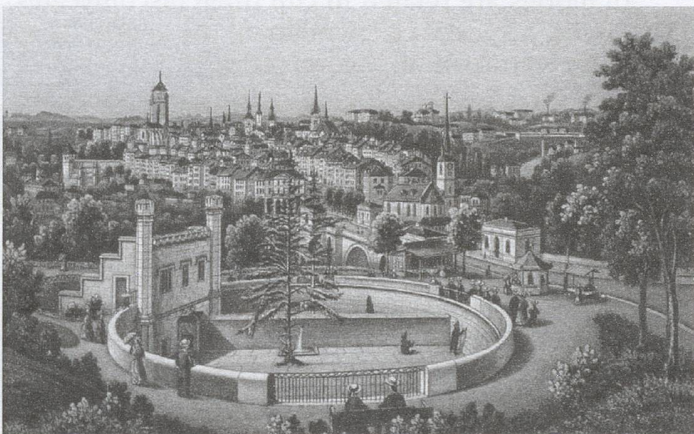
Old age overtakes an ages old tradition

It's a sad time for Bern: Pedro is dead. And with him has gone a slice of Bern's history. Pedro was the last bear in the capital's famous bear pit. At the grand old age of 28 he had to be put down in early May. He had been alone since his sister, Tana, was put to sleep in June 2008, suffering from incurable arthritis.

It was reported in November that Pedro himself not only had massive arthritis, but also a tumour. Towards the end of his life he was under constant veterinary supervision and being given painkillers.

He will not be replaced in the pit: His successors, currently living in Bern's zoo, will stay where they are until the new bear park - much bigger and bear-friendlier than the pit - opens later this year.

Although the pit has sometimes been empty before for renovation, the bears are so bound up with Bern's identity that a deserted pit has painful historical memories. The most notorious occasion was in 1798 when the French, having occupied the city, increased Bern's humiliation by ceremoniously removing the animals and taking them to Paris.



View of Bärengraben and the Old Town, around 1880

In the mid 19th century, the then bear pit (located where the railway station now stands) was so unhealthy that the bears all died - and the authorities briefly tried replacing them with badgers - "Dachs" in German. Satirists promptly renamed the town Dachsopolis.

Jérôme Föllmi is a vet who has made a study of the health problems of old zoo animals. "In the past 30 years the age of animals has increased considerably thanks to improvements in the way they are kept, their nutrition and our knowledge about them. "The problem is that as quality of care improves, animals live longer so pathologies develop and it isn't always easy to discover what they are."

Animals try to hide their problems for as long as possible. It's only when they start limping that it becomes clear they are in pain. By that time the disease may be well advanced.

Old zoo bears typically have problems with their joints; in their natural habitat bears hibernate, they

don't use their joints for a few months and by the end of the winter they have lost a lot of weight. In a country like Switzerland their behaviour is different; they don't get the same rest and in addition are likely to have extra kilos to carry around.

Bears are also subject to liver tumours, although it isn't known why. It is very difficult to do anything about them. They are hard to detect, and once found, anaesthetising a bear is a controversial procedure. But that's not all.

"The actual surgery is no more difficult than on a large dog, but it's the aftercare," Föllmi explained. "You have to sew him up, and then you have a problem. It's hard to get a bear to realise he mustn't touch the scar, or lick it. In fact, it's impossible."

Pedro reached a fairly average age for a zoo bear nowadays. They used to be allowed to live for longer, Föllmi says, but now vets are quicker to decide to put an animal out of its misery.

Paradoxically, although the bears have always been close to the hearts of the Bernese, for centuries the problem of elderly bears and surplus bears was solved with no heart-searching at all.

They were summarily dispatched, their flesh going to restaurants, their furs eagerly bought. They were normally killed in winter, when their coats were at their thickest. The bear keeper got the fat, which he could sell to apothecaries for its alleged medicinal qualities.

In 1891 the pit kindly provided a bear for the city fathers' feast marking the 600th anniversary of the foundation of Switzerland.

In 1913 the number of bears reached a record 24. No fewer than eight of them were killed and stuffed and arranged like the carousel of bears on Bern's Zytglogge clock for display at the national exhibition in 1914.

Bears have a long association with Bern. According to legend, the founder of Bern, Berchtold V von



Zähringen, named his new city after the first animal he killed in a hunt near the site of the bear pit. It was a bear - or Bär in German. This is why the city's coat of arms features a

bear. Bears have been kept in Bern for about 500 years. The current bear pit is the fourth.

The bears are the responsibility of Bern's Dählhölzli zoo. Pedro's successors, Finn and Björk, are already getting to know each other in Dählhölzli. They will be transferred to the bear park when it is completed in the autumn of 2009.

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