

Ukraine Zoo, Abandoned by Oligarch, Given a New Life

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You would think that Ukrainians, facing an invasion by Russia, would have more important things to worry about than saving zoo animals. But thanks to the support of the South African institution, the Lawrence Anthony Earth Organization, a saintly group of volunteers and civic leaders in Kherson braced arctic temperatures to transform a filthy zoo abandoned by an oligarch.

For the very first time in their lives the paws of mother bear Masha (age +15), her friend Dina (age +15), and Masha's frisky twin cubs Nadiya (female) which means "hope" and Mir (male) which means "peace," both 11 months, touched the earth. Through an Indiegogo campaign last fall, Lionel de Lange and his team raised the funds needed to expand their enclosure by 600%, providing a tree and a giant hollow log to have fun with. Masha dipped in the pool like it was the Caribbean, refusing to get out. Her cubs dug in the dirt and chased each other. The video of their joy can be seen here:

The unveiling of their new home was attended by Kherson's mayor Vladimir Mikolaenko, an advocate for transforming the Soviet-era zoo, full of rusted cages, into a beautiful community center for families to enjoy. For over thirty years, the zoo was an unbearable place where the cages were so dark and dirty, and built in a way that made them impossible

to clean, that the animals stuck their noses between the bars for fresh air. Now their lives have been transformed thanks to donations from around the world and the commitment of a community.



Lionel de Lange with Kherson mayor Vladimir Mikolaenko at the unveiling of the bears' new home

A family of wolves also experienced a similar dramatic transformation of their cramped and dreadful cage. There are over 200 animals at the Kherson Zoo, located on an island, so the work of de Lange, his army of volunteers, and the city has been an uphill battle.

"We started building in October 2014 and completed the wolf enclosure first as we needed to reunite the adults with their cubs," de Lange said, according to a release issued by LAEO. "In November we started the bear foundations. It was not easy as the weather was against us. We got down to -18C [-0.4F] at one stage, snowstorms, ice and rain. Because the zoo is on an island in the middle of the Dnieper River, which has no road access, we had to have most materials delivered by river barge."

This is not the first time locals have united to save zoo animals in Ukraine as the country resists a Russian invasion. Last spring, when news broke that the Kharkiv Zoo faced starvation, locals flooded the zoo with donated produce.

In Kherson, de Lange and his team promise to continue their work to make sure that the zoo becomes a jewel of the city, with the animals happy and healthy. To follow this amazing story of the power of community "Like" the Lawrence Anthony Earth Organization, Ukraine chapter on [Facebook](#).

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