

When scaffolding company owner Bob Taylor first met Mika, a yellow-cheeked gibbon, she was holed up in a tiny cage in a small and dingy pet shop in Ho Chi Minh City. Taken at a young age from the wild, years of confinement had had devastating physical effects. With little muscle to support movement, her legs were deformed and she was unable to walk, only able to shuffle about on her behind. Having already transformed part of his home in Vung Tau into a primate care centre, Bob took her out of the shop and into his own care. It was the start of a long and unique relationship.

After a short time Mika began to make progress. Under Bob's personal care she learnt to walk, swing and climb. Home to 23 primates, including three species of macaque and three other yellow-cheeked gibbons, life in the centre was good for Mika and she was beginning to thrive. But then Bob noticed another problem. Mika had developed cataracts and was starting to lose her sight. He was devastated.

"It broke my heart," he recalls. "So I ended up putting ropes in her cage so she could move around."

It was then that he had the idea. "With a will and a way you can do anything," he continues. "I had my cataracts taken out. So, I contacted people around the world and asked, 'Can we do it for Mika?' But everyone I spoke to said no, it was impossible."

The problem with such an operation, says Marina Kenyon of the Endangered Asian Species Trust (EAST), was the risk of infection. "Many veterinarians said it was far too dangerous — if Mika rubbed her eyes it would cause serious problems."

Established by Monkey World UK to support conservation work in Southeast Asia, while the role of EAST in what was to follow proved vital, it was local surgeons in Vietnam who were able to provide the breakthrough.

"Having spoken to doctors in America and all over the world, we eventually contacted some Vietnamese surgeons in Ho Chi Minh City," continues Bob. "'Could they do the operation?' They told me they had never done it before but they said they could try."

Adds Marina: "The final decision to proceed was based on the fact that Mika would lose all vision soon without the surgery — she really had nothing to lose. It was the Vietnamese that came through in the end."

Local Expertise, Foreign Supervision

The Community Eye Department in Ho Chi Minh City performed the surgery; the team

was headed up by Doctors Tien Phi Duy and Tran Huy Hoang. However, in the run up to the operation, Bob and his team had to overcome a range of difficulties.

With so many physical issues, there was huge concern about Mika's general health. So she underwent a series of tests to rule out diabetes and any other disease that may have had negative connotations for her wellbeing. Fortunately, for once she came out with a clean bill of health. Then there was the reoccurring problem of no previous cataract removal operation on a primate — the surgeons and everyone involved were quite literally in the dark. And operating on a primate rather than a human being meant the purchase of special drugs and equipment. While EAST provided the anaesthesia equipment, Bob eventually sourced all the other supplies from the UK.

All set and with just two days to go before the operation, there was one final hiccup. Worried about the spread of disease, the hospital assigned for the operation pulled out. So, after much bargaining and discussion, the procedure was moved to a local training centre and, under the supervision of specialists from Monkey World UK and EAST, doctors Tien Phi Duy and Tran Huy Hoang took Mika into the operating theatre. The procedure was a success.

Seeing Mika every few days during her rehabilitation, Marina says that there was almost an instant difference. "After just a few days she'd reach out to objects — she could clearly see so much better." But post-operation, there remained concerns. How could they stop Mika from rubbing her eyes. After much debate, pain relief was administered and eye drops were given to avoid infection and inflammation — due to the nature of Mika's surgery it was vital that her eyes did not cause discomfort; the measures taken achieved their goal. According to Bob, Mika now has 99 percent vision.

There have been other accomplishments, too. Constantly monitored throughout her recovery, to the delight of Marina and her team Mika is now able to feed herself and maintain a social position within her group. It was also discovered that the gibbon eye is very similar to that of an infant human. Therefore, this surgery can be easily performed elsewhere, meaning that a positive step in animal welfare and medicine in Vietnam is now being recognised and respected by the world.

Naturally, Bob is overjoyed.

"Mika has adapted to life with sight perfectly," he smiles. "The Americans said no. So did everyone else. In the end it was the Vietnamese who came through, against the odds." 🐼



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Mika the Marvel

Against the odds, Mika the gibbon was the first primate in the world to have eye surgery. She now lives in Vung Tau. Here's her story. Words by **Tara Oldfield**. Photo by **Nick Ross**