

As best as we can determine, Mike's problems started in the wild and had nothing to do with the treatment and hand-rearing protocols used at Woodlands. These same protocols have been used to successfully rear cubs in the past.

Mike had an uphill battle all the way. He may have been the smallest of the four cubs, he may have experienced some undetected trauma before he was found--after all, two of his siblings were found dead. He was chilled and dehydrated when he arrived at Woodlands, and while he received immediate and appropriate care from the staff here, his little body and developing organs never regained their full function.

Once Mike's problems were discovered, the veterinarians and rehabilitators on Mike's team decided that quality of life should be considered above all. While the prognosis was grave, the cub was still young and growing; the team didn't know if Mike could recover, but we wanted to give him a chance as long as we could keep him comfortable in the process.

When the results from the follow-up radiographs and bloodwork were received, the team reviewed them and found the blood values for calcium and vitamin D were still below normal values, but the liver values had returned to normal. The bone structure had improved but many bones were malformed and because the joints didn't develop properly; between that and scar tissue (callus), it was difficult for Mike to bear his own weight and move in a normal manner. Because he wasn't able to lift his body appropriately, additional pressure on the chest caused subsequent malformation of the ribs and sternum.

The malformed bones and joints would not straighten with additional time and Mike would never be able to function properly.

Unfortunately, keeping Mike alive in captivity was not a good option. The positions and condition of his joints would not enable him to stand, so he would likely develop sores on his chest and elbows, experience dislocations and develop arthritis and joint pains as he grew to 300 - 400lbs. This would mean chronic pain and a life-time of pain medication, and he would still not be able to climb and do the things a bear does.

After long and difficult discussions, over several days, considering every option, we found there were no options that would enable us to keep Mike alive, comfortable, and pain-free. So as difficult as it is, we made the unanimous decision to end his life peacefully and painlessly, before he reached that kind of discomfort.

- Erica Miller, DVM and Dave McRuer, MSc, DVM, DACVPM Wildlife Center of Virginia