



The Eurasia Center's Environmental Program

Asian Bears Facing Extinction

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The Asian Bear in Siberia may become extinct in five years. Photo Credit SiberiaTimes.com

Bears have roamed Eurasia for thousands of years, but human activities have severely reduced their numbers, and in some cases have even led to their extinction. Currently there are a total of eight bear species worldwide, and of these six are threatened with extinction¹. Asia is home to several species of endangered bears, including the Asiatic Black Bear, the Sun Bear, and the Giant Panda. The main threats these bears face are poaching and bear farming (driven by demand for their parts in traditional medicine) and habitat loss due to deforestation. All these factors are driven by an increase in Asia's population and that population's rising wealth, as well as global demand for commodities like rubber and palm oil.

¹ Brahic, Catherine "More Bear Species Threatened with Extinction" New Scientist, November 12th, 2007, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn12904-more-bear-species-threatened-with-extinction/>



Bear Populations are being decimated in Siberia for claws which are an Asian delicacy
Photo Credit: SiberiaTimes.com

Two of the biggest threats to Asian bears are poaching and bear farming. These are driven by the demand for Asian bear body parts, particularly for their bile, in traditional medicine. Bears produce bile in their livers and store it in their gallbladder to aid in digestion. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) bear bile is used to treat everything from a sore throat to cancer. Bear bile's prominence in TCM has created a massive demand for it, with China (the largest market) consuming 4000 kilos of bear bile each year.² Due to this demand the bear bile trade is incredibly profitable. For example, a single bear gallbladder can sell for \$2000 in Hong Kong.³ Poaching wild bears satisfies some of this demand, but the majority is met through farming of captive bears. On bear farms the bears are kept in tiny cages, and twice daily they are “milked” for their bile, which is

² Tsai, Laura “Detailed Discussion of Bears Used In Traditional Chinese Medicine” Animal Legal and Historical Center, 2008, <https://www.animallaw.info/article/detailed-discussion-bears-used-traditional-chinese-medicine>

³ Zaugg, Julie and Suri, Manveena “Bear Bile: Poacher Manhunt Exposes Murky World of Indian Wildlife Trafficking” CNN, October 25th, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/25/asia/bear-bile-trafficking-intl-hnk/index.html>

drained through a catheter inserted into the gallbladder.⁴ Bear farming is legal in China, where an estimated 10,000 bears are kept on farms.⁵ The Chinese government originally created bear farms to prevent the poaching of wild bears, under the assumption that farms would be able to breed bears and thus eliminate the need to hunt wild bears for their bile. Unfortunately, breeding bears has proven to be expensive and difficult, so bear farms have resorted to the cheaper and easier method of capturing wild bear cubs.⁶ The result of all this is that Asian bear populations are being hunted to extinction. While hard numbers are difficult to come by, both poaching and the capture of bear cubs for farming have significantly reduced the population of Asian bears, and that the trade continues to grow at an unsustainable level.⁷



The FSB in Trans-Baikal region detained a local who had 468 bear paws in his car. Photo Credit SiberiaTimes.com

⁴ Tsai, Laura "Detailed Discussion of Bears"

⁵ Hance, Jeremy "Is The End Of 'House of Horror' Bear Bile Factories in Sight?" The Guardian, April 9th, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2015/apr/09/bear-bile-china-synthetic-alternative>

⁶ Hance, Jeremy "Is The End of 'House of Horror' Bear Bile Factories in Sight?"

⁷ "Ursus Thibetanus Asiatic Black Bear" IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, Accessed February 27th, 2021, https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/import/downloads/asiatic_black_bear.pdf



Bear Gall Bladders seized by Poachers: Photo Credit SiberiaTimes.com

The other major threat to Asian bears is habitat destruction. Asian bears primarily live in temperate and tropical forests, but these have been reduced due to human activity. The forests of Southeast Asia have been particularly hard hit. The single biggest cause of deforestation is agriculture, in particular commercial agriculture, and large plantations.⁸ Two of the most damaging commodity crops in the Asian bears' range are palm oil and rubber, both of which are grown on large plantations. Between 1990 and 2008 55,000 square kilometers (an area about twice the size of Belgium) of forest was cleared to make way for palm oil plantations, most of it in Indonesia and Malaysia.⁹ Similarly, from 2003 to 2014 74,960 square kilometers of land in Southeast Asia was converted into rubber plantations, with 80% of that coming at the expense of forests.¹⁰ The next

⁸ "Deforestation: A Threat to People and Nature" World Wildlife Fund, January 13th, 2020

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/deforestation-fronts>

⁹ "Forests in Southeast Asia: Can They Be Saved?" European Parliament, 2020,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652068/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652068_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652068/EPRS_BRI(2020)652068_EN.pdf)

¹⁰ Fox, Jefferson and Hurni, Kaspar "Rubber is Replacing Natural Forests in Mainland Southeast Asia" NASA Land-Cover and Land-Use-Change Program, Accessed February 27th, 2020, <https://lcluc.umd.edu/hotspot/rubber-replacing-natural-forests-mainland-southeast-asia-0>

biggest cause of deforestation is logging, most of which is illegal and targets high-value timber like teak, which can be sold for a substantial profit. In Myanmar alone illegal logging has destroyed 58,000 square miles of forest (about the size of Michigan) since 1990.¹¹ For Asian bears this deforestation has greatly reduced the areas where they can live. Asian black bears and sun bears once lived across Southeast Asia, but now have been reduced to small pockets scattered throughout the region.



Asian Bear pups taken in the wild.

The underlying causes of both poaching and deforestation are the increase of population and wealth in Asia. These two trends have created many newly wealthy consumers, dramatically increasing the demand for commodities like bear bile, timber, and palm oil. Demand from China has seen particularly dramatic growth. For example, and illegal timber imports to China doubled between 2000 and 2013, making it the largest importer of illegal timber in the world.¹² Similarly, demand for products used in Traditional Chinese Medicine has increased enormously. This has not only created a larger market for bear bile but also for other traditional medicines like rhino horn and pangolin scales, with a similarly destructive effect on the populations of those species. But while Asian nations may be the main drivers for many of these trends, European and American demand

¹¹ Salopek, Paul "After a Century of Logging, Myanmar Struggles To Preserve Its Teak Groves" National Geographic, August 5th, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/after-century-logging-myanmar-struggles-preserve-teak-groves>

¹² Hoare, Alison "China: The Cause of (And Solution To?) Illegal Logging" The Diplomat, July 21st, 2015 <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/china-the-cause-of-and-solution-to-illegal-logging/>

for commodities is also having a destructive effect on Asian bear habitats. For example, palm oil has become ubiquitous in American life as an ingredient in everything from snack food to soap, and politicians and businesses in the US have promoted it as an alternative to fossil fuels.¹³



Malaysian Sun Bear Photo Credit: News.Mongabay

Asia is home to several species of bears, most of which are endangered. The main threats to these bears are the use of their bile in traditional medicine, which makes them a target for poachers, and the loss of their habitats due to deforestation. The plight of Asian bears is a microcosm of the mass extinction that faces many animals across the world, particularly those in the tropics. To save these species humans need to develop more sustainable ways of living, as well as learning to appreciate nature. If we do not, then not only will the Asian bears be gone forever, but so will many other animals.

¹³ Wright, Rebecca, Watson, Ivan, and Jamaluddin, Masrur "Boreno is Burning: How The World's Demand for Palm Oil is Driving Deforestation in Indonesia" CNN, November 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/11/asia/borneo-climate-bomb-intl-hnk/>



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