BEAR BILE FARMING

A FEBRUARY 2002 REPORT FROM THE U.S. EMBASSY BEIJING AND U.S. CONSULATE GENERAL CHENGDU

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The Chinese practice of extracting bile from captive bears for use in traditional medicinal products has gained attention in the international media (see International Herald Tribune, October 8, 2001). Many animal welfare groups decry the practice as inhumane. Opinions are divided over whether “bear farming” contributes to or detracts from protection of endangered bear species in the wild. Available scientific data are not sufficient to support either claim. Some foreign-based NGOs are taking proactive steps to eliminate the practice by rescuing and rehabilitating captive bears, developing synthetic substitutes for bear bile and encouraging farmers to go into other lines of business.

Bear Bile in Ancient Chinese Culture

Bile is a digestive liquid secreted by the liver and stored in the gall bladder. Bile from bears has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for centuries to “cool,” in terms of Chinese physiotherapy, “hot” illnesses, such as
inflammations, and to dissolve gallstones and kidney stones. It is also believed to help detoxify the liver and improve vision. According to Walker’s “Mammals of the World” (Ronald M. Nowak, Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), there is some scientific basis for the medical efficacy of bear bile. Bears are the only mammals that manufacture the bile salt ursodeoxycholic acid, which has been shown in Western laboratory tests to be effective in treating some liver diseases. A synthesized form of this substance is widely used to dissolve gallstones without surgery.

Evolution of Bear “Farming”

Traditionally, bear bile was obtained by killing wild bears and removing their gall bladders. As wild bears became increasingly rare in recent decades, bile became prohibitively expensive for most Chinese. However, in the 1980’s Chinese farmers imported a technique developed in North Korea for extracting bile from captive bears without killing them. The bears are placed in cages barely larger than the animal itself, an incision is made in each bear’s abdomen, and a catheter (basically a rubber or plastic tube) is inserted into the gall bladder. The bile is then drained through the catheter and collected for sale. So-called bear farming spread rapidly. Chinese authorities
estimate there are now 6,000 to 7,000 captive bears on bear farms in China, which are found in virtually every province. Some 40%-50% of the bears are found on the 10 largest farms, which have 300 or more animals each.

The farms were originally justified as a means to reduce the number of bears caught from the wild and killed for their gall bladders. However, the spread of bear farming lowered the price of bile products significantly and led to a growth in demand. The impact on wild bear populations is thus a subject of controversy. Meanwhile, many conservationists and animal lovers, both inside and outside of China, object to the practice on humanitarian grounds.

**Legal and Economic Factors**

Chinese medicine practitioners use bile taken from Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), commonly called “moon bears” because of the yellow-colored crest in their chest fur. These bears are listed in Annex 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), qualifying for the highest level of protection under the convention. However, they are given only second class protection under Chinese wildlife protection legislation,
which means responsibility for their protection rests with provincial authorities rather than the central government. Chinese animal protection legislation is being revised, but the process is slow. A new law, which should be much closer to international norms, is expected in 2002.

Many areas of China are desperately poor places, have large rural populations and meager options for development. Animal farming, not just of bears, was actively encouraged in those areas in the 1980’s as part of China’s drive for economic development. Authorities are therefore hesitant to interfere with the practice.

**Effects of Bear Farming on Wild Bear Population**

Ethical arguments about the practice aside, there are two schools of thought concerning the impact of bear farming on the population of wild bears:

1. Extracting bile from bears in captivity obviates the need to trap and kill wild bears and therefore contributes to
2. By creating additional demand for bear-bile products, bear farming encourages farmers to go out and capture more and more bears, increasing pressure on wild populations. According to a U.S. bear expert, and editor of *Ursus*, the journal of the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA), there currently is insufficient data on Chinese bear populations to support either of the above claims. He said very few studies of wild bear populations have been conducted anywhere in China.

Many bears rescued from bear farms have missing limbs, apparently lost in traps, indicating they were captured from the wild and not bred on the farm. In any case, the Chinese government maintains that bears are plentiful in the wild in China and that therefore their capture for the farms does not threaten the viability of the wild population. It is not clear, however, that the government has an accurate census of bears in the wild. Walker’s “Mammals of the World” contains an estimate of 12,000-18,000 wild Asiatic black bears in China. But such numbers are very difficult to verify, since little fieldwork has been done in China on wild bear populations. Many experts believe the officially cited numbers are inflated.
Conditions on the Bear Farms

Sources who have visited Chinese bear farms report that the bears are kept for years in “crush cages,” many of them rusted shut. Catheters are crudely inserted through their abdominal walls into their gall bladders, and bile is collected twice a day. The cages and collection procedures lack any sanitation, and the bears suffer from injuries, peritonitis, worms and other parasites. The bears’ muscles atrophy from lack of movement. Bears rescued from such farms can neither stand nor move about on all fours without physical therapy and improved diet to restore health. The bears’ diet at the bile farms consists of grain mash or porridge, and often the bears’ canine teeth and claws are removed to prevent injuries to the farmers. Chinese wildlife authorities say that conditions are better at the larger, more professionally run farms, but that even there, the bears’ health deteriorates quickly, and they generally live only about four years.

Chinese Government Strategies for Reducing Bear Farming
Chinese government officials lay some of the responsibility for the continuation of bear farming on inertia: once the farms are established, it is very difficult to get rid of them. Bear farmers must find alternative means of livelihood. If their bear farming permits are revoked, they will likely demand compensation. The estimated 6,000 bears currently kept on the farms would need care and feeding — a burden that would probably fall on local and provincial governments already struggling to provide education, health and social welfare services to their human constituents. The bears cannot be released into the wild, and farmers are certainly not going to pay for their upkeep if there is no economic return.

Chinese wildlife specialists at all levels, but especially at the national level, want to see bear farming reduced and ultimately eliminated. The legal, economic and practical aspects of bear farming, however, argue against a rapid resolution. For example, currently all licenses related to bear farming (trapping, breeding, transport) are issued at the local or provincial levels, making an across-the-board national solution difficult to implement. National authorities have attempted to restrict demand for bear bile products, in the hope that lower demand will reduce economic incentives, and hence lead to the gradual reduction and ultimate elimination of the farms. National authorities forbid
export of bear bile products.

The central government’s strategy for managing the problem comprises the following elements:

1. prevent new farms from opening;
2. close small farms, where practices are most abhorrent;
3. restrict demand by controlling exports, encouraging synthetics, etc.;
4. centralize legal authority; and,
5. work with NGO’s to manage the existing population of captive bears.

**NGO’s Working with Chinese Authorities to Stem the Practice**

A number of Western-based conservation and animal welfare groups have expressed concern about Chinese bear farming on both ethical and conservation grounds. Some have taken proactive measures to both rescue and rehabilitate the captive bears and to find alternative ways to
satisfy the demands of Chinese traditional medicine practitioners.

An agreement between Animals Asia Foundation (AAF - www.animalsasia.org), the State Forestry Administration (the central government body charged with protection of wildlife) and the Sichuan Provincial Forestry Bureau created a temporary bear rescue sanctuary near Chengdu, Sichuan. AAF is a non-governmental organization based in Hong Kong, founded in 1993 after its founder visited a bear farm in Guangdong Province and was appalled at the conditions under which the bears lived. The sanctuary, located at a former county animal rescue facility that was virtually unused, was loaned to AAF until a permanent rescue center can be built. Although the site is only temporary, AAF invested almost $250,000 to bring the building and grounds up to useable — albeit primitive — conditions.

AAF signed an agreement in July 2000 to rescue 500 of the most abused bears from the worst farms in China. AAF hopes to eventually establish more sanctuaries and eliminate all of the bile farms in China. The number of farms had already been reduced from an estimated 400 farms with 10,000 bears in 1993 to roughly 250 farms with 7,000
bears by early 1999, and the numbers continue to gradually decline. AAF pays farmers to give up bears and find alternative sources of income. The Sichuan Government also reclaims the operating permits for the farms as the bears are removed and gives the permits to AAF.

The U.S. Consul General in Chengdu recently visited the AAF sanctuary to learn more about these efforts. There were about 65 bears at the sanctuary — already reaching its limit. AAF had purchased rights to an adjacent 20-acre site to build a permanent sanctuary for the 500 bears it eventually plans to house under the July 2000 agreement. They hoped to have the permanent sanctuary ready for operation in 2002.

Newly rescued bears brought to the center are washed with a commercial shampoo to remove fleas and other skin parasites, given a broad-based deworming medicine and examined via ultrasound to determine the state of their gall bladders and catheters. In many cases the gall bladders are infected and must be removed immediately. Other injuries, for example open sores on claws, abscessed teeth, loss of eyes or limbs, are also noted and treated appropriately. The newly rescued bears the Consul General saw were severely malnourished with dull fur and extremely
bad tempers from their constant suffering at the farms.

The Consul General also had a chance to observe and feed (through cage bars) some of the bears that had been at the center for a year or more. The change was extraordinary. The bears had long, glossy fur, were even-tempered, alert and playful. The bears had been in captivity for too long to be successfully returned to the wild, but at least they could live out their lives in moderate comfort and dignity at the sanctuary.

Synthetic Substitutes Beginning to Take Hold

AAF is also working with the government and a Chinese traditional medicine research body to promote herbal alternatives and the use of synthetic bile in the place of natural bile in traditional medicines. The alternatives have proven equally effective and less expensive, and their use is increasing. Demand for bile is dropping, and bear farmers now have an oversupply. Unfortunately, in an effort to make good on their existing investment, the farmers are
promoting bear bile shampoo, health drinks and other products that have no demonstrated therapeutic value but depend on consumer preference for animal products used in traditional medicine.

Comment

Additional research on Chinese bear populations, particularly in areas where bear farming occurs, would help generate reliable information on whether bear farming is contributing to or detracting from conservation of endangered bear species in China.

Both the Chinese central government and provincial authorities recognize the negative aspects of bear bile farming. Still, bear bile farming continues with little restriction or regulation. While some of the responsibility for this lack of progress can be attributed to lack of funds and legal obstacles, another fundamental reason is that the Chinese public has not voiced any strong opposition to the practice.