

Down with cages, up with freedom! The fight for Sun and Moon Bears

By Gregor Year 3

Bile farming and dancing for tourists have left Sun and Moon Bears in a deadly predicament.



Mary and Mr Hobbs, Taronga Zoo's two resident Sun Bears enjoy a leisurely stroll around their spacious enclosure. Photograph: Mrs Mussone

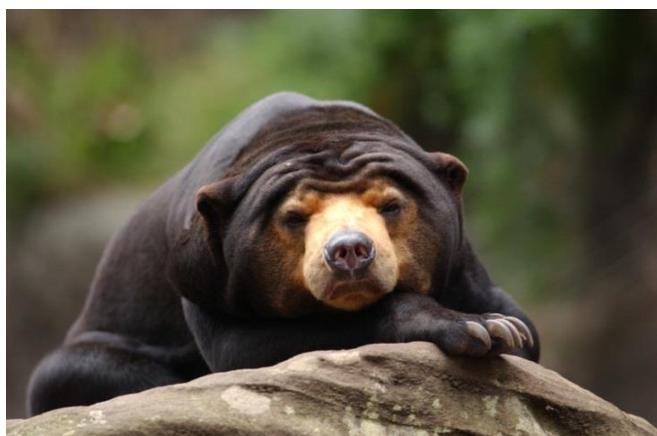
Sun and Moon Bears are critically endangered as their numbers continue to decline. The population has fallen by more than 30% in the last 30 years and if nothing is done they will become extinct. "Over the past year we have saved 12 to 15 bears," said Mary Hutton. With the help of trustworthy organisations, Sun and Moon Bear's population should be going upwards at a steady pace. But unfortunately Sun and Moon Bear's population are still hindered by numerous ongoing issues.

Bile industries continue in multiple South East Asian countries, including Laos and China as the bile from Moon Bear's is prized in some Chinese medicine. In Vietnam bear bile, trade is

illegal. However, in the words of Lesley Small, a zoo keeper at Taronga Zoo, "Even though in Vietnam it's supposed to be illegal they find ways of doing it and not getting into trouble for it."

Moon Bears in the bile industry are forced to live in cramped, metal cages no larger than a fruit and vegetable box. "A lot of these bears have been kept in a cage forever and they could not be returned to the wild. They wouldn't have the survival skills or know anything about foraging or be aware of man so we have to look after them," said Mary. Subjected to permanent injections, they never get to see light of day or the chance to walk. "They have sometimes big tumours from the bile that has been leaked out of their body," said Lesley Small. These bears are exposed to these conditions for the duration of their life.

Sun Bears, to a lesser extent, are used in the bile industry. Lesley said, "Sun Bears are on the illegal bile trade list of the world." So when people trade Sun Bear bile - if you see it - it is actually illegal.



Mary lies down on a bumpy stone inside her enclosure.
Photograph: Diane Schofield.

The collection of bear bile dates all the way back to the 1800's and is considered very valuable in some cultures. Moon Bear bile is believed by some to heal the human body but many other things can cure the human body for example herbs and other types of plants. As well as supposedly healing the human body, bear bile is used in many products such as shampoos and soaps.

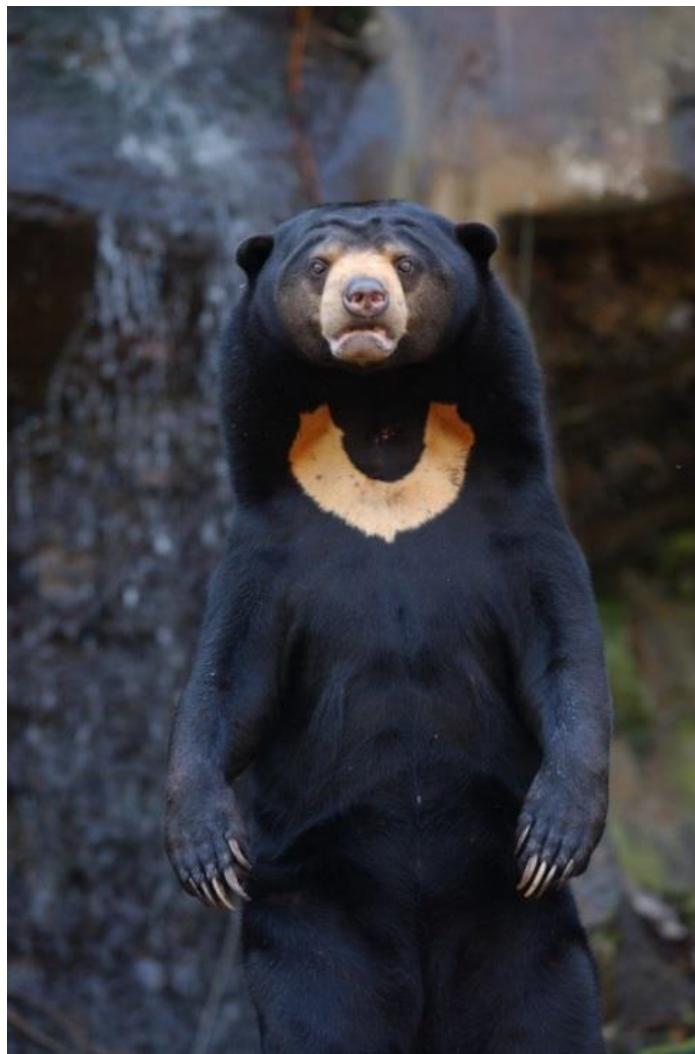
However, whilst bear bile farming is illegal in many countries, closing down the farms isn't as straight forward. In some situations, the bears are the only source of income for a local farmer, meaning an alternative solution for income needs to be created to ensure the farmer doesn't start bile farming again. "Our strategy is that if a man is taking the bile from a bear, then we try to implement some sort of other income, alternative income for the

owner of that bear so that he doesn't have to take the bile from the bear and sell it on the market cause it's a very lucrative business," said Mary.

Aside from bile farming, Sun Bears are also used in the tourism industry. This form of tourism sees Sun Bears put onto the streets of Asia and forced to dance in front of strangers with a piece of rope going through their nose. Luckily, there are organisations such as Free the Bears who are working tirelessly to put an end to dancing bears. "We've achieved our goal in India. That's one of our biggest goals, saving all the bears on the roads that used to be exploited and abused and dragged along by the end of a rope for tourist attraction," said Mary. So far, they have managed to save over 600 bears who have been taken back to the sanctuaries of Free the Bears where they are looked after for the remainder of their lives.

The conservation organisation, Free the Bears is helping Sun Bears through protection, education and rescue programs. Working throughout Asia, in Vietnam, Laos, India and Cambodia, Free the Bears are enriching the lives of Sun Bears. "Once we rescue them we take them back to our sanctuary and look after them for the rest of their lives," said Mary.

Animal Asia is also doing their part to make the public of Asia aware of what is happening to the poor Moon Bears. "The main thing we do is we rescue the bears from bile farms. "In particular they are building bear sanctuaries in Vietnam and China which is where the



One of Taronga Zoos Sun Bears stands up on two feet for a photo.
Photograph: Diane Schofield

rescued bears are rehabilitated and cared for, for the rest of their lives," said Anne Lloyd-Jones, Australian Director of Animals Asia Foundation. They are even working with the governments to help put a stop to bear bile farming.

Taronga Zoo is helping these endangered animals by feeding and looking after their two Sun Bears, Mary and Mr. Hobbs. They are not taking these creatures for granted, working with other world organisations. "Taronga Zoo is involved in a number of organisations. We are partnerships with Free the Bears," said Lesley. They are also working with the wildlife mentoring network, TRAFFIC as a way to protect the future of creatures such as the Sun Bear.



Mr. Hobbs strolls on top of his comfortable rock.
Photograph: Gregor

Sun Bears are amazing creatures. In the Malay language age, Sun Bears are named Basindo Nan Tenggil and make their homes in the branches of native trees. They use their powerful bite to tear into tree bark. Sun Bears are half the size of Moon Bears. Each Sun Bears' crest is different, just like everybody's finger print is different and interestingly, Sun Bears do not hibernate.

The Sun Bear's home is in their native forests which give them the chance to run free and survive without mankind trying to distract them by making them sit in cages and perform on the streets of Asia. People put strings through sun bears noses and out their body which is terrible because the people doing it get paid but on the other hand the Sun Bears which are going through this process are being hurt and taken away from their family with only enough food provided to ensure they perform when required.

These two species of bears have declined to devastating levels. However, with amazing organisations such as Taronga Zoo, Free the Bears and Animal Asia all doing their part for conservation, Sun and Moon Bears just might survive long-term. You too can help improve

things for these magnificent creatures. Keep on helping animals every day of your life and with each opportunity you get, we are getting closer to a sustainable future for all creatures.