

Robert Carmichael writes: The bear trade in Asia involves four species in the family Ursidae: sloth bears, found on the subcontinent; brown bears, which are found across Eurasia and North America; and the sun bear and the moon bear, two species of black-furred bears with unique marks on their chests that are native to Cambodia and the region.

Sun bears once roamed across the tropical forests of 11 Asian countries, ranging from India and Bangladesh in the west to China in the east and to Malaysia and Indonesia in the south. But the deforestation caused by logging and oil palm plantations has hit sun bears hard, particularly in Southeast Asia: Though rigorous population estimates are hard to come by, TRAFFIC estimates their numbers may have fallen off by as much as 30 percent in 30 years. Moon bears live in 18 countries from Pakistan to China, but have also been hit by poaching and habitat loss: Experts believe there could be as few as 25,000 and 100,000 moon bears in the wild. Both the sun bear and moon bear are classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as vulnerable species.

Bear No. 179 at Phnom Tamao is a moon bear cub. She arrived in early August, already nicknamed the "Facebook Bear" by the staff thanks to pictures of her plight, which were posted on the social network by a Cambodian man who helped in her rescue.

Her escape had begun less than 24 hours earlier on a warm, damp Phnom Penh evening when No. 179 slipped her flimsy cage at the house of a wealthy Chinese businessman, scaled a 10-foot-high wall, and dropped into the fishpond of a neighboring boutique hotel.

Twenty-six-year-old Ren KunRachana was drinking coffee in the hotel when he spotted what he thought was a cat on the wall. "But I looked again and then thought it was a dog because it's big," he said. By the time the animal scrambled from the fishpond and leaped into the swimming pool, it was clear it was something much more unusual.

Within seconds, the terrified bear had buried herself in a dark recess behind the hotel bar. The businessman's staff turned up and, after an hour, recaptured her. By then KunRachana, knowing it is illegal to own endangered wildlife, had started filming a video and taking pictures of the runaway animal. He also phoned a 24-hour rescue hotline and, after learning that the wildlife team could not raid the house until the following morning, uploaded his images on Facebook as proof.

"I worried that the people would take it away -- so that's why I posted to Facebook, because I didn't want [the household] to kill the bear," he said. "I did that to let everyone know it was there."

The next day, Facebook Bear was confiscated by Cambodia's Wildlife Rapid Rescue Team (WRRT), a jointly run government and NGO emergency response squad that specializes in saving trafficked wildlife. The cub was taken to Phnom Tamao, where,

after a few weeks in the quarantine facility, Facebook Bear would be released into a forested enclosure with others her age. The businessman was not prosecuted.

In its 46-page report, TRAFFIC examined nearly 700 seizures of live bears or bear products across Asia, using records drawn from government statistics, media, and its own research. (Two-thirds of the global trade in bears or bear parts involves an Asian nation, with China being the main player.)

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The report found that at least 2,801 bears had been trafficked -- some alive, others dead and in parts -- in 17 countries and territories between 2000 and 2011. In addition to the trafficked bears, some 6,000 bear paws -- typically used in soups -- were seized during the same period, the bulk of them from Russian brown bears. These numbers are conservative estimates, Shepherd warned: Many shipments of bears or bear parts are never intercepted.

The chain starts with hunters who snare or shoot wild bears in their native habitat, then sell them on to middlemen, who then sell them on to bile farms, or to those who will butcher them for meat. The bile, sold in both liquid and powder form, eventually works its way into products ranging from shampoo to throat lozenges. The liquid is used in traditional medicine as a reputed treatment for all manner of ailments, from cancers to hangovers to gallstones. At each subsequent stage, the margins and profits increase, driving a process that is now "threatening the native bear species," Shepherd said.

"People have no idea of the scale," he said. "The [recorded] seizures are the tip of the iceberg."

Trade in bears and bear parts is largely illegal across Asia. The four species of bear unique to the continent, which include sun bears and moon bears, are listed as threatened with extinction, meaning all cross-border commercial trade in them, whether of live bears or bear parts, is prohibited. And even though it is permitted to trade bear bile within China and Japan -- one pharmaceutical company that runs bear bile farms even attempted to go public on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange last year -- it is strictly illegal to move bear bile across any national borders.

But Shepherd said enforcement is sorely lacking. Countless dealings with governments in the region over the years have led him to conclude that many officials "just don't care," and he cited corruption as another significant barrier to upholding the law. Meanwhile, human encroachment and the felling of trees for lumber means bears are losing valuable habitat.

TRAFFIC says there are obvious steps that willing countries can take, including imposing penalties on lawbreakers; raising public awareness of the trade; encouraging people to seek out herbal or synthetic alternatives to bear bile; and shutting down bear

bile "farms," which remain legal in some countries, including China, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. But few governments seem inclined to take these measures.

One of the few countries making progress in tackling bear trafficking is Cambodia, one of the poorest in the region -- thanks in large part to the WRRT, the team that saved Facebook Bear from a grim fate. The WRRT brings together members of the Cambodian forestry administration, who know the specifics of the country's wildlife laws; the military police, who act as muscle on raids; and staff from the Wildlife Alliance, a nonprofit that provides funding. The WRRT confiscated most of the 156 bears rescued in Cambodia between 2000 and 2011.

The WRRT maintains a hotline that people like KunRachana, who spotted Facebook Bear, can call to alert them to illicit fauna; it also uses a network of paid informants to determine who is smuggling wildlife, and it carries out routine inspections of markets, restaurants, border crossings, and known trade routes.

Cambodia led the way in TRAFFIC's analysis of the actions taken to combat the illicit bear trade, with 190 seizures of bears or bear parts -- around the same as Russia, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and India combined, and significantly higher than second-placed China (145) and third-placed Vietnam (104).

The WRRT carried out more than 60 operations in the quarter ending in June, said Nick Marx, Wildlife Alliance's director of wildlife rescue and care programs. Among the animals confiscated: two moon bear cubs in May that were likely destined for a bile farm in Vietnam (they went to Phnom Tamao), 55 macaques, several pythons, a gibbon, and dozens more mammals, reptiles, and birds. The traders or owners are typically either fined or prosecuted.

When it comes to regional improvements, law enforcement is key, and TRAFFIC wants countries seeing high levels of illegal trade, like China, Russia, and Vietnam, to emulate what the report calls "the highly effective collaboration" that Cambodia's WRRT enjoys. Yet in Cambodia's case, the WRRT's existence is at least partly a consequence of that government's relative openness to partnering with nonprofits. Not all countries in Asia are so welcoming.

The bears captured on the WRRT's raids typically end up at Phnom Tamao because it is too risky to re-release them: The country continues to lose bear habitat through illegal logging and land clearing, and poaching remains a threat.

At Phnom Tamao, the two tiniest arrivals are cared for by Cambodian keeper Kem Sun Heng, whose talent has earned him the nickname "cub daddy number one."

"Jammy" and "Donut" -- No. 180 and No. 181 -- each weigh just a few hundred grams and fit comfortably on Heng's hand. They were picked up near a village in Cambodia's northeast after their mother was chased away from the nest by village dogs. They need

feeding every three hours, a process that also involves measuring the squealing animals, weighing them, and logging the details.

At this stage their lives revolve around sleep, milk, and being placated by Heng's sympathetic clucks that imitate those made by their absent mother. Should they survive, the hope is that they or their offspring will one day be released into Cambodia's forests to roam as their ancestors did for generations, with the days of bile farms a distant memory.