



Unbearable: The international bear bile trade



Introduction

Recent reports suggest that the international bear bile trade and trade in wild bears to supply bear bile demand is ongoing, perhaps even escalating, and likely having an impact on conservation of bears in the wild in Asia. Significantly, much of the bear bile and wild bear trade in Asia constitutes illegal trade in Appendix I specimens.

In Doc. 30.1 on Enforcement Matters, the Secretariat expresses concern regarding a growing illegal trade in bear parts and derivatives. World Animal Protection urges Standing Committee to recommend to range States and those Parties with captive-bear facilities to increase enforcement efforts and report all seizures of bear bile products to the Secretariat. Standing Committee should direct the Secretariat to share this information at CoP18 so that targeted action may be taken by the Parties, including amendments to Resolution Conf. 10.8 (Rev. CoP14) and relevant Decisions.

World Animal Protection carried out investigations in traditional medicine stores in Japan, US and the UK. 66% of investigated stores in Japan, pictured, sold bear bile, often imported illegally from China and Russia.

Bear and bear bile trade and the Golden Triangle

Evidence suggests that bears, and their parts and derivatives, are amongst the top 10 most widely traded wildlife in the area known as the "Golden Triangle"—the border area of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand.¹ This trade is largely driven by tourists from China and Vietnam.²

The Golden Triangle

CITES Listing

Appendix I

- *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*
- *Helarctos malayanus*
- *Melursus ursinus*
- *Tremarctos ornatus*
- *Ursus arctos* (Only the populations of Bhutan, China, Mexico and Mongolia; all other populations are included in Appendix II)
- *Ursus arctos isabellinus*
- *Ursus thibetanus*

Appendix II

- All other bear species

Source: <https://www.cites.org/eng/app/appendices.php>



Lao PDR

Bear farming in Lao People's Democratic Republic has grown since 2000 when the first bear farm was officially recorded. By 2012, 8 commercial facilities held 115 Asiatic black bears and one sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*).³ In 2018, a study indicated the presence of 8 facilities, 7 of which were documented commercial facilities.⁴ Since 2012, the number of bears held in captivity in two Chinese-owned facilities located near the Chinese border tripled, although the overall number of bears held in captivity has remained steady.⁵ According to a recent report published by Global Ecology and Conservation, the consumer base is largely Chinese tourists and the general area is a "trading hotspot."

At least two facilities in the "Golden Triangle" area are commercial bear bile production facilities. These facilities are reportedly owned by ethnic Chinese and produce bear bile nearly exclusively for Chinese tourists, as indicated by the prices for these products that are given in Chinese yuan.

Significantly, all the bears in captivity in Lao PDR appear to be taken from the wild, and at least some are reported to be imported bears. According to investigators, there is no evidence that bears are being bred in captivity.⁶ Instead, data collected indicates that bears are removed from the wild to stock the facilities and private homes where bears are kept.

Evidence also suggests that bears are traded internationally in order to stock facilities in Lao PDR and that at least one facility also trades in live bears. One facility in the Golden Triangle holds bears primarily for supplying restaurants; this facility—the Don Savannah Zoo—held 29 bears when visited in 2017, and staff told investigators that the bears were from Myanmar.⁷ At a facility in Boten, also along the Chinese border, bears are transported to China and Vietnam in boxes.⁸

Myanmar

Demand for bear bile products in Myanmar also appears driven by Chinese nationals, and productivity is growing to meet demand. Bear farms have been documented in the cross-border regions of eastern Myanmar, along the border with China. Additionally, wildlife markets populate these areas to cater to Chinese nationals. Mongla wildlife shops organize sales of bear products to Chinese customers using mobile app WeChat.⁹

Despite the illegality of domestic trade of bear bile in Myanmar, there is evidence that live captive bear bile extraction is increasing, particularly in the eastern region near the borders with Lao PDR and China.¹⁰ A study published in 2011 found that there were three captive bear facilities housing 58 Asiatic black bears in this region.¹¹ By 2016, six captive facilities were documented, including four selling bears and whole gallbladders, and two extracting bile from live bears.¹²

The bear products and derivatives sold in these markets are all likely sourced from wild-caught Asiatic black bears, as are the bears held in captivity for the production of bear bile in this border area.¹³ Asiatic black bears are on Appendix I and there are no registered captive breeding facilities, according to the CITES website.

Researchers found evidence of 120 live bears in Myanmar's eastern border regions, including 100 Asiatic black bears at a single facility. Additionally, a large new bear bile extraction facility was under construction in Mongla City.¹⁴

Mongla City is an important regional hub of wildlife trafficking and is believed to play a critical role in the bear bile trade specifically on account of the evidence of large facilities, the proximity to China, and efforts in China to end bear farming.¹⁵ At the sites visited by undercover investigators, Chinese nationals were found to be performing the bile extraction.¹⁶

The role of Chinese bear farms

China is home to 68 licensed bear farms, housing over 20,000 bears. Unlicensed farms hold approximately 2,000 bears additionally.¹⁷ The bears held in these facilities are primarily Asiatic black bears. Although the bear bile farms in China supply domestic demand primarily, products from these facilities supply traditional medicine shops throughout the world.

Demand for bear bile products appears to be driven primarily by Chinese nationals. Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Vietnam, and Japan all have significant domestic markets for bear bile products,¹⁸ as do Taiwan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.¹⁹

China has consistently been found to be the main source of most bear products in the international trade. According to the China Chamber of Health Products Commerce for Import and Export of Medicines, China exported \$32,788,000 of TM to Japan in 2010; \$27,381,00 to Hong Kong; \$20,061,000 to United States; \$14,486,000 to South Korea; \$10,271,000 to Malaysia; \$9,921,000 to Vietnam; \$7,747,000 to India; \$7,605,000 to Taiwan; \$6,892,000 to Singapore; and \$6,762,000 to Germany.²⁰

Image below: Bear gall bladder and unprocessed bear bile jar, imported from Hong Kong and sold in a pharmacy in Japan.



Smuggling methods

Investigations reveal that China supplies a significant market share of bear bile products outside of China. A 2006 investigation across multiple cities revealed that in Singapore, of 25 of the shops visited that stocked bear bile products, 18 (72%) sold products originating from China.²¹ Of 11 shops visited selling bear bile products in Seoul, South Korea, 5 (45%) offered products reported as being from China.²² Of the 13 shops selling bear bile products in Canada, 11 (85%) reportedly sourced products originating in China.²³

Similarly, in a survey conducted in 2010-2011, 27 of 61 (44%) shops surveyed were found to be selling bear bile products. Of the gallbladders found in those shops, 38% claimed to be of Chinese origin and over 50% claimed to be of Russian origin.²⁴

In a survey of Malaysian TCM shops in 2011, China was the only reported source for bear bile vials, crude bear bile extract and powder, and other manufactured bear bile derivatives.²⁵ In addition, according to shopkeepers, China supplied 60% of all imported gall bladders available in traditional medicine shops in Malaysia.²⁶

Recent investigations suggest that China, as well as Russia, may be significant sources of bear bile products in Japan. Of the 12 stores visited in Japan during 2018, 66% either stocked bear bile products or offered to order it.²⁷ A majority of these stores are located in Osaka.²⁸ Investigators noted that obtaining bear products in Japan was relatively easy and that availability and sale volumes appeared to be high despite high awareness as to the illegality of the trade.²⁹ Most consumers are reportedly Korean or Chinese.³⁰

Yet another 2018 survey, conducted in South Korea, found that of 19 shops selling gallbladders, 5 (26%) stated China as a source.³¹

Many cases involve small volumes of product concealed in an ad hoc fashion.³² Shopkeepers advised undercover investigators that concealing bear bile in personal luggage could evade detection in trade between China and Malaysia,³³ China to Australia,³⁴ and Hong Kong to Japan.³⁵ Shopkeepers in Malaysia claimed to smuggle bear bile products in personal luggage, and one added that he regularly traveled to both China and Russia to acquire gall bladder and bile.³⁶

According to INTERPOL, bear bile products smuggled on commercial flights are occasionally concealed in strong smelling foods such as coffee, or dipped in chocolate.³⁷ In some instances, traffickers of live bears in cross-border areas destined for bile extraction facilities have taken on the guise of circus troupes to evade suspicion.³⁸



World Animal Protection carried out investigations in traditional medicine stores in Japan, US and the UK. In San Francisco, 15% of stores sell bear bile and when in powder form it sells for US\$100 per gram.

Image right: Bears held in captivity endure years of pain and suffering. This is one such bear who suffered for more than 13 years in Vietnam's Tieng Giang Province.



U.S. seizure snapshot: exports and re-exports from China and Vietnam

The patterns of bear bile product trafficking into and within the United States offer insights into the place of the United States in the global bear bile market, as well as the nature of the markets within the country.

A 2006 investigation of 130 traditional medicine shops in the U.S. found that 20 shops (15%) were offering bear bile products for sale.³⁹ Of those shops, the majority were predominantly located in central or eastern metropolitan centers, such as New York (9), Chicago (3), and Boston (2).⁴⁰ In 2018, a comparative investigation of 102 traditional medicine shops in North America (San Francisco, New York, and Toronto) found that 21 shops (20%) offered bear bile products for sale.⁴¹ Although inconclusive, the data could suggest a higher instance of bear bile sales in metropolitan centers with developed Chinatowns; this

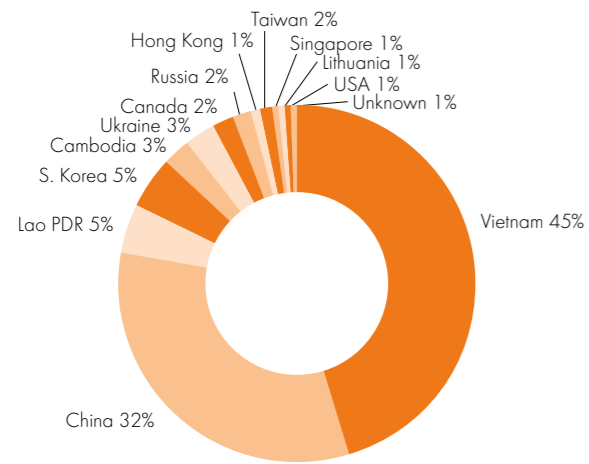
corresponds with a 2018 study which suggested that global trade in bear bile was driven by pockets of Chinese nationals living abroad.⁴²

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's LEMIS database records the seizures of illegal products being trafficked into the United States, including bear bile products. Based upon the LEMIS data collected from 2006 to 2015, the majority of seizures of bear bile products took place in Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (41%), followed by Los Angeles International Airport (11%), and Portland International Airport (10%).⁴³ China was the most common country of origin, accounting for 31% of shipments seized, followed by Vietnam at 21%. However, Vietnam is the most common re-exporter, with 45% of total shipments arriving in the United States being routed through Vietnam, followed

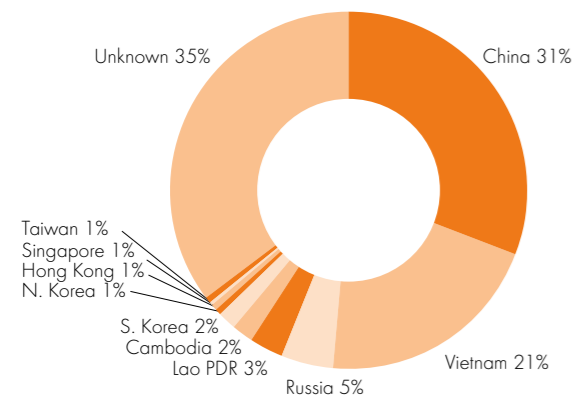
Internet sales

by China at 32% of total shipments. Of those shipments which were re-exported from Vietnam, nearly half of them were from an unknown country of origin, while 87% of the Chinese shipments originated in China.

U.S. bear bile imports by country of export between 2006 and 2015



U.S. imports of bear bile products by country of origin between 2006 and 2015



The internet has quickly become a key platform facilitating illegal wildlife trade.⁴⁴ The internet is now the preferred method of conducting business and sometimes is a result of displacement from physical marketplaces where enforcement authorities have cracked down.⁴⁵

Sales of bear bile products over the internet represent a growing problem. As recently as 2017, researchers looking for online bear bile sales, including on Facebook in Vietnam, identified and reported 115 bear crimes.⁴⁶ These included gallbladders and other parts, such as claws. According to a recent study, online wildlife trade is increasing in Southeast Asia, and perhaps more so in countries which have long been hubs of illegal wildlife trade.⁴⁷ In particular, in its most recent 5-week snapshot study of online trade in Thailand during June and July 2018, investigators found two Asiatic black bears for sale.⁴⁸

This new and deeply troubling trend for the illegal sale of wildlife needs immediate attention and action from both law enforcement agencies and the social media platforms. This work has begun, with many influential companies and social media platforms joining the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online, including eBay, Facebook, Google, Instagram, and Pinterest.⁴⁹

World Animal Protection's research and campaigning to end the trade in bear bile and derivatives spans the past two decades, in conjunction with similar efforts carried out by many other valuable partners.

The research presented in this briefing paper shows that the international illegal trade in bear parts and derivatives is continuing despite international measures to prevent it, and that wild bears continue to be poached for trade. Much of this trade appears to emanate from China, with China, Japan, South Korea among the primary consumers.

To stem the international bear bile trade, World Animal Protection urges Standing Committee to recommend that Parties, where bear bile trade occurs, enhance enforcement efforts and report seizures of bear bile products and wild bears to the Secretariat. World Animal Protection further urges Standing Committee to direct the Secretariat to report bear bile product and wild bear seizures to the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties so that the Parties may take appropriate action, including revisions to Resolution Conf. 10.8 (Rev. CoP14) on Trade in and Conservation of Bears.



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Cover image: Bears kept for the bile industry are often kept in small, barren cages such as these.

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