



A sun bear in a cage on Borneo in 2013. Photo: Sabrina Ariana (CC BY-NC-SA)

Bear-ly on the Radar: Indonesia's Illegal Trade in Sun Bears Could Worsen in the Pandemic

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The world's smallest bears face oversized pressure from poaching, traditional medicine and the illegal pet trade. The COVID-19 pandemic could make things even worse.

Last month, as the world dealt with the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic, China's National Health Commission proposed an unexpected and potentially devastating treatment for the virus: the injection of "traditional medicine" containing bear bile.

China's inhumane treatment of captive sun bears — which are kept in tiny, cramped cages and continuously "milked" for their gall-bladder bile for use in traditional Asian medicine — has long earned condemnation from conservationists and animal-rights activists.

But the proposal of using bear bile as a treatment for COVID-19, which is unlikely to have any real medicinal value for coronavirus patients, has implications beyond those affecting the captive-bear population. By creating additional demand for bile and other bear products, it could make things worse for wild bears in Indonesia, a hotspot of poaching and wildlife trafficking.

Sun bears are amazing forest dwellers that, as omnivores, have immense ecological value. They drive forest nutrient cycling, seed dispersal and forest regrowth. They're a form of pest control, since they feed on termites and other insects, and serve as engineers of the forests. Their hunt for ants and bees creates tree cavities that provide homes for various other forest inhabitants, including endangered hornbills.

But their ecological significance is trumped by the contraband worth of their parts, which are highly valued by humans as trophies and charms and for use in traditional medicine.



A hole carved in a tree by a sun bear. Photo © Andy J. Boyce (CC BY-NC 4.0) via iNaturalist

Historically indigenous communities in Indonesia have always hunted bears for ceremonial clothing, food, jewellery, medicine, protective charms and hunting trophies. This had little impact on wild populations due to the traditional hunting methods used. But hunting methods have evolved and now include the use of firearms, snares and electrocution, all of which make it much easier to kill large animals. Meanwhile ongoing clearing and logging of forests have made wildlife ever-more accessible to poachers, with significant impacts on populations of sun bears and other species.

While detailed population estimates for sun bears don't exist, Indonesia has been described as an important stronghold for the species, which are found in higher densities here than in any other range state. But the bears face a multitude of threats in Indonesia, not the least of which is illegal wildlife trade.

An Ongoing Threat Moves Online

Our studies, including an analysis of Indonesian seizure data related to bears from 2011 to 2018 and a three-month survey of the online availability of bear-related products on Facebook, reveal an ongoing threat from the illegal wildlife trade in Indonesia.

Along with a local demand for sun bear parts such as claws, teeth, skins, skulls or stuffed whole specimens, there's also the sale of claws and teeth on social media, both in their natural forms and carved into intricate designs or crafted into pendants.



A sun bear in a tree in Malaysian Borneo, its strong claws visible. Photo: Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay (CC)

We also found evidence of the trade in live cubs as pets. For example, a live bear cub was recently seized, along with live orangutans and clouded leopards, in the Indonesian state capital of Jakarta. The animals were en route to Kuwait and were rescued during an investigation into international wildlife trafficking, including shipments to Middle Eastern countries. The Middle East is under increasing scrutiny for its flourishing exotic-pet industry.

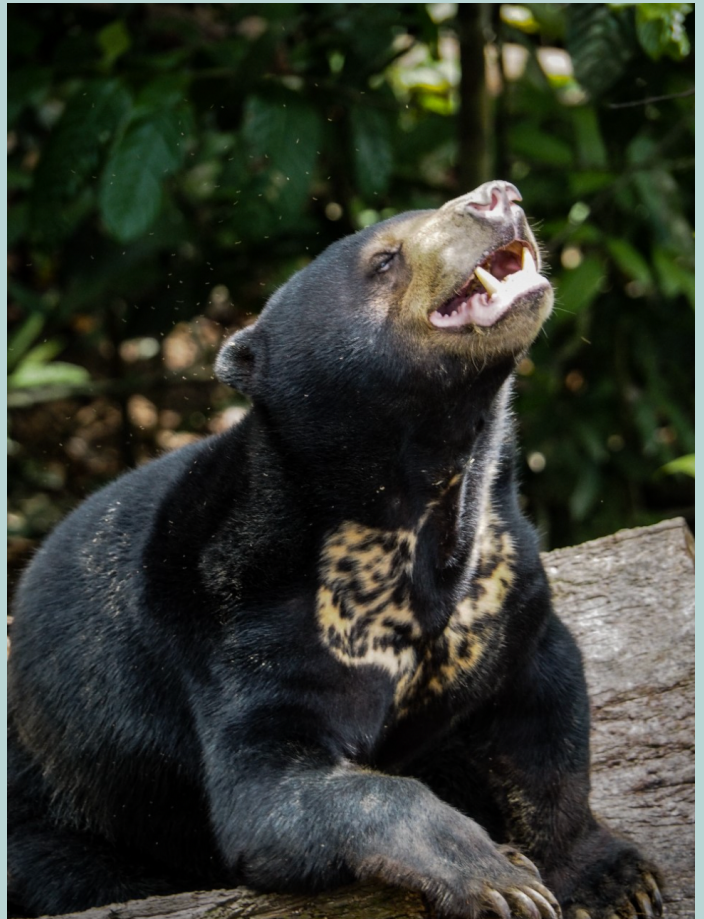
And of course, even before the pandemic, there was evidence of more targeted hunting of bears for their gallbladder and bile, used in traditional medicine, and their paws for exotic meat. In January 2018 Indonesian authorities arrested a wildlife trader and confiscated 64 bear paws and 22 frozen Sunda pangolins (*Manis javanica*) stored in a refrigerator, along with one live pangolin. The items were reportedly purchased from an indigenous tribe in Jambi, West Sumatra, and destined to be sold to Chinese restaurants in big cities in Java.

Cambodia, Malaysia and Vietnam have also been implicated as destination countries in the shipment of bear parts from Indonesia's East Kalimantan. The largest sun bear seizure in our study period took place in 2017, involving two bear skulls, 266 bones, 24 gall bladders, 1087 claws and 67 canines — all destined for Vietnam. According to the arrested suspect, this was not the first time such a shipment had been sent there.

Lack of Law Enforcement

Wildlife traders in Indonesia clearly have little fear of law-enforcement action. Sun bears have been protected in the country since 1973, yet the illegal trade in live bears, their parts and derivatives all persist. But their ecological significance is trumped by the contraband worth of their parts, which are highly valued by humans as trophies and charms and for use in traditional medicine.

A sun bear at Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre. © Yvonne Chong, all rights reserved. Used with permission.



International regulations are also ignored. Sun bears are listed in Appendix I of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which prohibits international trade, but evidence continues to point to Indonesia as a source of trafficked bears to other parts of the world.

As with almost all wildlife crime, this trade — when it's encountered by law-enforcement officials — rarely results in heavy punishments for the perpetrators. Our analysis of bear seizure data showed that only 32% of incidents resulted in successful prosecution and just one of those cases came close to the maximum penalty afforded by the law. In that case — the January 2018 seizure involving 64 bear paws — the trader received a jail sentence of 4 years and 6 months as well as a IDR100mil fine (approximately \$6,900).

Arrests and prosecutions are so low, in part, because traders exploit legislative loopholes in Indonesia's wildlife laws. While the sale of sun bears, their parts and derivatives remains illegal, the authorities can only take enforcement action against anyone they know to be in possession of protected species, or when suspects are physically involved in an illegal transaction.

Traders are aware of these flaws and manipulate them to their advantage by moving many of their transactions online to Facebook and other social media platforms, which are more difficult for law enforcement to monitor and regulate. Traders can easily set up multiple anonymous social-media accounts and secret trade groups. Face-to-face meetings between seller and buyer are no longer required, as payment can be transferred online and goods can be shipped directly to the buyer. The convenience of these transactions makes it more difficult for authorities to connect buyers and sellers, which could later be used as evidence in court.



Sun bear photographed in Malaysia in 2019. © Paulokim217 (CC BY-NC 4.0) via iNaturalist

This is not exclusive to sun bears, and all of it ties into the broader network of wildlife trade and smuggling syndicates. In at least 48% of seizure cases involving sun bears, other high-profile animals were seized at the same time, including tigers, orangutans, pangolins, clouded leopards, hornbills and other birds.

Through all of this, we see alarming evidence that bears appear to be of low conservation or legal concern in Indonesia. Instead of facing severe consequences, Indonesians found in possession of a live sun bear — to sell or keep as pets — are merely given an opportunity to surrender the animal.

Necessary Actions to Protect Sun Bears

The threat of illegal trade — combined with loss and degradation of suitable habitat and food resources, as well as conflict with humans — puts sun bears at considerable risk. Now, with COVID-19 potentially complicating things even further by increasing the incentive to poach wild bears, it's time to implement targeted conservation efforts for the species to ensure viable populations remain in the wild. The IUCN Sun Bear Conservation Action Plan, 2019–2028 already includes useful and practical initiatives to support government agencies in range states. Its recommendations should be immediately put into action throughout the sun bear's range.

Beyond that action plan, it's also essential that Indonesia prioritize enforcing its existing legislation to protect bears from poaching and illegal trade. And it's crucial that the country close its legislative loopholes, which would support and empower enforcement authorities in the investigation and prosecution of illegal wildlife traders operating online. Greater effort also needs to be made to raise awareness of the nation's wildlife laws protecting species — as well as of the conservation needs of the sun bear. Such outreach should target the public, enforcement agencies, the judiciary, traditional medicine practitioners, hunters and poachers, consumers and villagers living in or near sun bear habitat.

If Indonesia is to remain one of the strongholds for sun bears in the age of COVID-19 and beyond, these protection measures urgently need to be established — before more populations of these incredible, important animals disappear.

