

The Moon Bear's Plight

When one thinks of bears, one conjures images of magnificent Grizzlies roaming the Alaskan wilderness, or the proud black bear, the symbol of Russia. All in all, people tend to associate positive qualities – such as freedom and dignity – with these creatures. Sadly, these pictures could not be farther from the truth for the many Asian black bears, also known as moon bears due to the distinctive crescent white fur on their chest, kept in captivity and harvested for their bile.

Bear bile, which contains ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) and is touted for its purported ability to reduce fever, protect the liver, improve eyesight, break down gallstones, and act as an anti-inflammatory agent, is a common ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine. (Wikipedia) Due to the high demand, about 30 tons of bear bile powder is produced every year. (Xinhua) Although a part of the UDCA is harvested from already-deceased bears, such amount is not enough to satisfy the demands of the market. In the past, moon bears were sometimes hunted to keep up the supply, but their population has been declining and they are now labeled as a vulnerable species. (ICNU; McLaughlin) As a result, many individuals took advantage of this fact and set up giant “bile farms” in which the bears are kept in cages and continuously “milked” for their bile. These farms are prevalent throughout East Asia, with experts estimating that there are about 3000 bile bears in Vietnam and over 7000 in China. (McLaughlin)

The conditions endured by these unfortunate bears can be described as painful and intolerable at best. Imagine living in a filthy cage that does not even afford enough room for a small person to turn around. Worse yet, imagine having a tube inserted into your gallbladder

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with no hope of ever removing it. Disgusting as they may seem, such sufferings are endured by these “bile bears” every single minute. Their daily meals are meager; they live in cages that do not permit them to stand up or move at all. Most of them have catheters or steel tubes that allowed them to be “milked”, an excruciating procedure as evidenced by the bears “moaning and chewing their claws”. (Wikipedia) Sometimes, metal jackets are used to completely restrain the movement of these bears during the milking process. (McLaughlin) At night, the cut is kept open with a Perspex catheter that “causes severe pain”. Other methods, such as the “free-drip” method, may cause a high mortality rate as the bile can bleed into the abdomen. These wounds often cause infections because of the squalid environment. (Wikipedia)

The hardships these bears face not only detrimentally affect their physical body, but also their minds (McLaughlin). For example, many develop so-called “head rage” – wounds that result when they vent their frustration by banging their heads on their cages. Some bears also suffer from missing claws or paws that they chewed off during times of great stress, which happens on a daily basis. These stresses – compounded by the little amount of food available – lead to severe weight and hair loss: clear signs of depression. After the bears cannot produce bile anymore, they are simply sold to the slaughter houses and harvested for their paws, a delicacy, or left to die in a corner. (McDermott) Their average life expectancy is only a few years due to the amount of abuse present in these bile farms. (Wikipedia) What these bears suffered can be summed up with a simple phrase by activist Karl Ammann: “Bear bile farming is the worst animal welfare scenario I have ever encountered.”

Perhaps even more deplorable is the fact the agony that these bears face can be avoided entirely. Many plants produce ursodeoxycholic acid (UCDA), the active ingredient in bear bile. In addition, scientists have been able to synthesize over 50 artificial forms of ursodeoxycholic acid that are just as effective as those found in nature. (Xinhua)

Naturally, many voices have sprung up to oppose this lamentable practice. For example, celebrities such as Jackie Chan – a vociferous advocate – and Steve Irwin – who made films featuring a sanctuary dedicated to saving these bears – have dedicated themselves to raise public awareness on this topic. Ordinary people like Jill Robinson also set up foundations and sanctuaries to save these bears and provide them with treatments and exercises in an effort to revert the mental and physical scars resulting from the cruel treatments in bile farms. (Wikipedia) An early success was achieved when Vietnam announced that it will “phase out its bile farms, a move that could put pressure on China and Korea to close bear farms on their soil.” (McLaughlin) Shortly after, Vietnam passed a law that set up an designated area as a national park for bears rescued from bear farms. (McDermott) Also, as many as four Chinese pharmaceutical firms have announced their plans to discontinue the use of bear bile in their products (Xinhua). Despite these efforts and success stories, the demand and production of bear bile remain as high as ever because of deep economic and social roots that are hard to correct. Therefore, a solution to this problem must also seek to eradicate the social and economic foundations of bile farming.

First and foremost, China can institute a ban on bile farming, the bile trade, and bear hunting and strictly enforce it. However, there is a high probability that the ban will only drive bile trading into the underground market so a follow-up policy should be implemented that

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attacks the practice of farming bile bears on both the social and economic sides. For example, many people in China favor the use of bear bile over its alternatives. Thus, bear bile use is not only restricted to medicinal uses. Many times, bear bile is also found in high-end products such as shampoos and wine. (McLaughlin) To combat this attitude, we should begin a campaign that publicizes the facts surrounding bear bile and other alternatives, which includes the danger of using bear bile. For example, an herbal expectorant that contains bear bile “has been suspected of causing serious allergies, including shock, high fever, as well as heart and kidney failure” (Xinhua). We can inform the public of this danger, and then provide them with several cheaper but safer alternatives, such as artificially synthesized UCDA. In addition, we need to document the pain and suffering the Asian black bears face in the bile farms and then distribute the photographs to the public. I believe that the public is composed of people who are very sympathetic to the plight of these animals. The reason why they are not speaking against the operation of bile farms right now is because they have not witnessed the cruelty the moon bears face there. Therefore, by documenting these cruelties and displaying them to the general public, many consumers of bear bile will realize the detrimental effects their consumption of these products have on the bears and cease using them. Concurrent with these efforts, we must also invest in research programs that might produce more potent alternatives to UCDA so that the consumers would shift away from using bear bile.

Next, we need to attack the economic root of this problem. Although we tend to strongly condemn those who run these bile farms, what we do not realize is that many of these people were destitute farmers with little professional skills and had to either resort to producing bear

bile as a means of sustaining themselves and their families or face poverty and starvation. As a comparison, bear bile farming is nonexistent in Japan as opposed to the rampant practice found in China and other East Asian countries. This discrepancy is due to the higher earnings of the Japanese farmers as opposed to their Chinese counterpart. Therefore, the Chinese government and people like us need to collaborate and improve the economic conditions in the rural countryside. For example, the Chinese province of Yunnan, in which bear bile farming is widespread, is known for its numerous scenic locations. The Chinese government can actively advertise for increased tourism to this area, which helps prevent farmers facing poverty by providing more job opportunities, and at the same time generate tax revenue that will go toward combating current bile farming operations.

Gathering bile from moon bears kept in “bile farms” is a deplorable practice that causes unbearable pain and stress on such majestic animals. As such, this practice should be terminated immediately. However, to complete this task, we must not only push for the respective national governments to ban bear bile, but also solve the underlying economic and social issues related to bile farms. Only through these combined efforts can we persuade the public from using bear bile and reduce the revenues generated by the bile farms and thus save the bears from a life of suffering and hopelessness.

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