

## Moon Bears: The Gut-Wrenching Truth by Alexi Lee

It's like something out of a horror movie. There are stacks of cramped cages on stilts in the dark room with huge bears trapped inside of them. The bears are clawing at their faces, bars digging into their skin. They have painful metal jackets wrapped around them. A farmer walks over to a bear and places a bowl under a cage then reaches under it. A yellow liquid drips down from the bear's abdomen as it writhes and moans in pain. The noxious stench of bile and sick bears pollutes the room. Some have no teeth or claws, and they have infections around their stomachs. This is a bear bile farm.

Bear bile has been used as medicine for thousands of years, but industrial bear bile farming began in the 1980s after North Korea created the free-drip method.<sup>1</sup> The free-drip method spread quickly to China and Vietnam, and the production of bile was easier and faster, creating an industry. It eliminated the need to hunt and kill bears for their gallbladders, by instead keeping them in cages forever to continually get their bile.

Bear bile has a high level of ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA), which can be used to treat liver and gallbladder conditions. Bear bile can be taken in many forms, including pills, powders, capsules, ointments. This acid is not exclusively found in bear bile - there are herbal alternatives that serve the same purpose. However, some practitioners believe that bear bile can heal nearly everything, from sore throats to epilepsy. Bear bile is put into shampoo and wine, and some people even buy an entire gallbladder, desiccating it for consumption.

The most commonly used bear is the Asiatic black bear, otherwise known as the moon bear. Asiatic bears are thinning in the wild, because with the farms come habitat destructions and illegal trade for their body parts. There are an estimated 25,000 moon bears left in the world, leaving them vulnerable to extinction. The moon bears in farms are severely undernourished and dehydrated, usually fed small amounts of porridge when they should be eating fruits and small animals. Their claws are sawed off to prevent injuries to the farmer. If a bear is unable to produce bile, they are simply left in the cage to die. The living conditions are unhealthy and completely unlike bears in the wild, causing many moon bears to get untreated malignant tumors and diseases that eventually kill them.

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<sup>1</sup> "The History," *Animals Asia*, Retrieved April 29, 2018, <https://www.animalsasia.org/us/our-work/end-bear-bile-farming/what-is-bear-bile-farming/the-history.html>.

Bile is extracted using needles and catheters that pierce the stomach and allow farmers access to it. The catheters are surgically placed in the bears and metal jackets are worn to keep the catheter in place. This metal jacket is comparable to a torture device with its spikes and rusty metal scraps. A more “humane” approach is called the “draining apparatus” where a hole is made in the bear’s abdomen, allowing bile to drip freely. The hole must be continuously opened up with surgery because the body tries to heal itself and close the hole up, rendering an unbearable pain. Also, the bile can leak back into the abdomen, causing severe infection in the bear, which can ultimately lead to death if untreated.

It’s not hard to imagine that bears in these conditions experience severe mental distress. Although the widely shared story of a moon bear smothering her cub and then running headfirst into the wall is likely apocryphal, there are reports of the bears banging their heads on the bars of their cages and committing suicide by refusing to eat.<sup>2</sup> Many bears have no teeth because of the time spent trying chew through the bars.<sup>3</sup>

There are several countries that have bear bile farms, but China and Vietnam are the main consumers. China alone has more than 10,000 bears in farms and sells their bile to pharmacies.<sup>4</sup> Vietnam was one of the main producers of bear bile farms, but recognizing the inhumane process, decided to ban it in 2006. However, the loophole is that bears can be kept as pets, allowing owners to secretly extract bile. Additionally, businesses began moving to Laos, where bile farms are banned, but weak law enforcement allows them to thrive.<sup>5</sup> The spread of bear bile farms allows the business to grow.

The moon bear is not the only animal in Asia being targeted for the Chinese medicine trade. Tigers, pangolins, Sumatran rhinos, and Asian turtles are all experiencing exponential declines in their populations. These animals are severely hunted for the use of their body parts in traditional Chinese medicine. For example, the tigers in tiger farms are killed to use as rugs and prove a person’s wealth in China. Their bones are believed to have medicinal purposes, like bear bile, but they have to be killed in

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Nelson, "Are bears purposely committing suicide to protest the horror of bile farms?" *Mother Nature Network*, February 12, 2012, <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/are-bears-purposely-committing-suicide-to-protest-the-horror-of-bile-f>.

<sup>3</sup> "Five things you need to know about bear bile farming," *Animals Asia*, October 28, 2014, <https://www.animalsasia.org/uk/media/news/news-archive/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-bear-bile-farming.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jani Actman, "Inside the Disturbing World of Bear-Bile Farming - Latest Stories," *National Geographic*, May 5, 2016, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160505-asiatic-bear-bile-trade-laos/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

order to obtain it. Most of these animal species are trapped in small crushing cages and bred intensively, similar to moon bears. These animals are all facing endangerment for decorations and medicine that can be substituted with a harmless alternative.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to bear bile farming. “Biotransformation technology” has allowed poultry bile to be made,<sup>6</sup> which serves the same purpose as bear bile but is created artificially. Traditional Chinese practitioners have said that there are herbs that have the same healing properties. For example, “Dr Feng Yibin, associate director at the University of Hong Kong’s (HKU) School of Chinese Medicine, found that berberis is just as or more effective than bear bile for liver diseases and cancer.”<sup>7</sup> Although these alternatives can be a huge leap in saving bears, some practitioners only believe in real bear bile because of tradition.

Bear bile remains legal in China, yet citizens are taking a stand. Campaigns against the farms have been made and the issue is becoming mainstream, especially through social media. In addition, multiple Chinese pharmacies now refuse to sell bear bile products.<sup>8</sup> Many people have recognized the inhumane torture that the bears have to experience and have sought ways to help. Animal charities like Animals Asia use the donated money to buy moon bears from farmers and care for them. Bear bile sanctuaries have been created to rehabilitate and care for rescued moon bears. Dens and semi-natural enclosures allow the bears to live the rest of their lives in safety with other bears.

The government has also taken action. “In 2001, Ministry of Health announced that health products made of bear bile powder would not be approved any more in order to protect the sources of wild animals and guarantee the safety of health products,” and “In 2005, regulations on the usage of bear bile in Chinese Medicine products were stipulated by the Chinese government. Food and Drug Administration of all provinces, and municipality directly under the Central government should strictly

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<sup>6</sup> “Synthetic bile plan could end demand for bear bile,” *Animals Asia*, July 31, 2014, <https://www.animalsasia.org/us/media/news/news-archive/synthetic-bile-plan-could-end-demand-for-bear-bile.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Sia, “Stop using bear bile, switch to better herbs,” *Star2.com*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.star2.com/living/living-environment/2017/07/18/stop-using-bear-bile/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Hance, “Is the end of ‘house of horror’ bear bile factories in sight?” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2015/apr/09/bear-bile-china-synthetic-alternative>.

adhere to the regulations by limiting the usage of bear bile powder in Chinese Medicine products.”<sup>9</sup> These laws have been enforced to protect the bears to an extent, although they have not stopped it completely.

In order to eradicate the bear bile industry, stricter laws must be enforced and bear bile farms made illegal everywhere. Countries must come together and create laws that can close loopholes and completely ban the farms. Fortunately, people are uniting to fight against the animal cruelty, and pharmacies that are crucial for the industry are rejecting any bear bile products. Moon bear sanctuaries are sharing stories of the normal life that bears are finally getting, motivating others to support the end of bear bile farms.

In order for the loopholes to be closed, governments of countries that are popular with bear bile farms should take greater steps in ensuring no moon bears are being used for bile extraction. In addition, people who own bears “as pets” should be strictly monitored. Also, as the country with the largest bear bile production, China should finally make bile farms illegal.

The bear bile industry causes the death and unimaginable suffering of defenseless bears. There are many alternatives that include synthetic bile and plants that serve the same purpose, and would not harm a living creature. Anyone can make their voices heard by donating money, or simply signing petitions. All bear bile farms can be shut down, and the remaining bears can be moved into safe sanctuaries. Already, more than 600 bears have been saved by Animals Asia, and the number continues to increase.<sup>10</sup> If enough people put pressure on governments, changes can be made, and a bright future lies ahead for the moon bears.

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<sup>9</sup> Y Feng, K Siu, N Wang, et al, "Bear bile: dilemma of traditional medicinal use and animal protection," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, January 12, 2009, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19138420](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19138420).

<sup>10</sup>Natasha Brooks, "Progress! Politician Calls for the End of Bear Bile Farming in China," *One Green Planet*, March 28, 2018, <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/politician-calls-end-bear-bile-farming-china/>

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