



Bears Deserve *a* Healthy Dose *of* Preventative Medicine

by Adam M. Roberts

There is an unsightly scar on the face of humanity, directly resulting from our commercial exploitation of the magnificent natural wonders of the earth. For centuries, species have been decimated by habitat destruction and individual animals have been slaughtered for their parts and products made from them. These scenarios are well documented: elephants eliminated for valuable ivory; tigers targeted for skins and bones; rhinos ravished for the supposed sexual benefits of their horns. In at least these three examples, drastic protective action ultimately proved necessary to halt the downward spiral toward extinction.

Will a myriad other species be depleted before we act with a similar emergency room mentality to save the remaining few individual animals for posterity? I suggest we practice proactive protection to ensure that the burgeoning trade in animal parts and products doesn't wipe out additional species. The current situation facing the existing eight extant bear species across the globe provides one example where a dose of global preventative medicine would prove beneficial to their long term protection. Acting now would perhaps be a vaccine against the short sightedness of human greed.

Examination of Bears' Status

Most estimates place the population of all eight bear species combined at fewer than one million animals. Roughly seventy-five percent of these are the black bears in North America.

All bear species receive some protection through national legislation or regulation of international trade by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Most bear species are on Appendix I of CITES which prohibits commercial international trade (basically, "endangered" status). This includes: the Asiatic black bear (southwestern Asia), the sloth bear (Indian subcontinent including Bangladesh and Nepal), the sun bear (southern China, Cambodia, Thailand and elsewhere in southeastern Asia), the spectacled bear (South American countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia), and, of course, the popular Giant Panda (dispersed in isolated areas of China).

Brown bears have various sub-populations throughout the world and are either protected from trade under

CITES, or are listed on CITES Appendix II (essentially, "threatened" status) which allows some trade under certain protective restraints. The other two species, the polar bear (Alaska, Canada, the former Soviet Union, Greenland and Norway) and the American black bear (North America), are also on CITES Appendix II.

Diagnosis of Risk

There are variant levels of protection for bears throughout their range and from nations whose citizens con-

risk facing numerous bear species from the international trade in bear parts and products. Bear paws are an expensive culinary delicacy. As recently as December 1998, a Canadian restaurant was fined for serving bear paw soup, a high priced meal, which can fetch hundreds of dollars or more in restaurants in Asia and other countries.

But the real future threat in the bear parts trade comes from the consumption of bear gallbladders and bear bile in traditional Asian medicine.

Practiced across the globe, traditional medicine is a centuries-old holistic medicinal practice that sometimes, unfortunately employs parts of threatened and endangered animals in its medical remedies. In the *Handbook of Traditional Tibetan Drugs*, compiled by T. J. Tsarong, over a dozen prescriptions call for bear bile: to relieve stomach pain and diarrhea, kidney and hip discomfort, painful or watery eyes, headaches and lethargy. In China and Taiwan, bear bile apparently is also surfacing as an ingredient in luxury shampoos, tonics, and even hemorrhoid creams.

Bear bile contains ursodeoxycholic acid, which has genuine medicinal application, unlike the questionable efficacy of rhino horn and tiger bone as aphrodisiacs. According to the *Physicians' Desk Reference*, this bile acid is naturally occurring in small quantities in humans but in larger quantities in some species of bears.

Not all proponents of traditional medicine advocate using parts of threatened and endangered species. The Earth Care Society (Hong Kong) and the Association of Chinese Medicine and Philosophy recognize over 50 herbal alternatives to bear bile, proving that traditional medicine



Chris Davis/IFAW

A bear who was caged for 13 years on a Chinese bear farm, before confiscation by the Chinese authorities.

sume bear parts. Sadly, each species continues to face threat from habitat destruction and other external factors. For instance, landmines in Croatia have killed European brown bears, and forest fires between India and Pakistan have reportedly resulted in two black bear deaths. In the mountains of northern Spain, a railroad, highway, and ski resort have split the area's dwindling brown bears, resulting in two smaller populations of limited genetic diversity. Sun bears are taken from the wild for the pet trade and environmental pollutants threaten polar bears.

Possibly the most worrisome development, though, is the growing

can be practiced without harming animals. In a 1996 statement to the CITES Standing Committee, Word-Fei Cheung of The Institute of Chinese Medicine condemned what he called “the unscrupulous people who trade in the products of species such as the tiger, the bear and the rhinoceros.” He acknowledged that “there are many hundreds of ingredients in our Pharmacopoeia, and whatever beneficial effect may be achieved by using endangered species, there are equally beneficial effects from using other alternatives. Please understand that we are in the process of healing people, not in the business of causing danger to wild animal species.” These sentiments were echoed by Stefan Chmelik of The Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine in a 1997 letter to me. He contends that “very few professional practitioners would think of using bear gall” and that “the omission of bear gall has posed no real restriction on our ability to practice.”

It is imperative that the traditional medicine community follows the lead of Mr. Cheung, Mr. Chmelik and others, for it is the demand for bear parts and products and the exorbitant prices that can be fetched for these items, that drive the trade. The wild Asiatic black bear already has been decimated, so much so, that in 1984, China started “farming” bears for their bile. Data supplied by the Chinese Ministry of Forestry shows that in 1996, 7,642 bears were kept in 481 farms throughout the Chinese provinces. Over half of these bears were being inhumanely “milked” for their bile with a steel catheter inserted into the gallbladder.

The reality of the trade, however, suggests that bile from these farmed bears cannot possibly meet global demand (and there is a significant international effort to shut down

the cruel bear farms). As the Asiatic black bear populations have declined, increasing pressure has been put on North American black bears to supply worldwide markets. Today there are an estimated 500,000 to 750,000 wild black bears across North America. Although that population is currently

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A dealer in a traditional Chinese medicine pharmacy in South Korea offers bear gallbladders and shows photo of the gallbladder being removed from an endangered Asiatic black bear. Purchasers frequently require such documentation of a bear kill in an attempt to determine authenticity.

stable, justifiable fears exist that poachers are targeting these animals for their gallbladders, which may someday lead the American black bear down the same path as its Asian cousins.

Bear carcasses missing their gallbladders and paws have been found across the United States. In 1998 alone, bear poaching and bear gallbladder trade cases surfaced from coast to coast. In Oregon, a state racketeering law is being used to prosecute members of a poaching ring that allegedly has killed as many as 28 black bears, gutted them for their gallbladders, and left the carcasses to rot. According to Captain Lindsay Ball, Director of the Oregon State Police's Fish and Wildlife Division, “These are not acts of what you call hunters, these are thieves who are stealing Oregon's wildlife.” A Utah man was arrested in January for moving bear galls to South Korea. The *Salt Lake Tribune* quotes the accused man saying, “In my mind, I won't get caught.” And as 1998 came to an end, a Maryland couple was charged for buying black bear gallbladders illegally in Pennsylvania.

In the first months of 1999, a joint three year investigation between Virginia and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service resulted in 25 arrests of individuals from Virginia and New Mexico for over 100 wildlife violations regarding bears. The press release issued by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) recognizes “that significant trade in gall bladders and bear paws out of Virginia exists” and that the American black bear has been targeted for the global bear parts trade. Virginia DGIF expects this case “to yield one of the largest prosecutions in the nation's history for crimes relating to bear poaching and illegal trade in bear parts.”

Part of the problem is the patchwork of state and national laws that regulate commerce in bear parts. In America, some states allow commerce while most do not. Once a gallbladder

is dissociated from the animal, it is impossible to know the bear's origin. This creates a legal enforcement loophole that enables dealers to acquire bear gallbladders illegally in one state, and sell them under false pretenses in a state where such sale is allowed—completely circumventing the bear range state's sensible prohibition against such reprehensible conduct. This also puts endangered Asiatic black bears at greater risk since any legal bear parts trade provides cover for those who wish to profit by selling the parts of endangered bear species.

Prescription for Preservation

Creating a uniform legal framework is the simplest way to address America's role in the trade. At the 1997 meeting of the Parties to CITES, a resolution was unanimously adopted on the "Conservation of and Trade in Bears." The Parties noted "that the continued illegal trade in parts and derivatives of bear species undermines the effectiveness of the Convention and that if CITES Parties and States not party do not take action to eliminate such trade, poaching may cause declines of wild bears that could lead to the extirpation of certain populations or even species." To this end, it urges Parties to confirm, adopt or improve "their national legislation to control the import and export of bear parts and derivatives."

Years before, the international community came to these conclusions. Legislators in the United States Congress introduced laudable legislation titled the "Bear Protection Act." Sponsored in the House of Representatives by Illinois Congressman, John Porter, and in the

Senate by Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, it would prohibit the import, export and interstate commerce of bear gallbladders and bear bile. Senator McConnell, for one, is an indefatigable advocate of bear protection. He explains his vigorous backing of the bill this way: "American bears are now in more danger, since the dramatic decline of bear populations



Chris Davis/IFAW

Bears who had spent 13 years incarcerated in tiny wire cages on a bear farm in China so their bile could be "tapped" for use in traditional Chinese medicine are now free in China's first ever bear sanctuary, sponsored by IFAW and managed by the Animals Asia Foundation.

outside the U.S. has led poachers to turn to American bears to fill the increasing demand. This is a growing problem—a national problem—and I, for one, will not stand by and allow our own bear population to be decimated by poachers."

The bills enjoyed remarkable bipartisan support in the 105th Congress: Senator McConnell's bill had an astounding 55 cosponsors and Congressman Porter's companion legislation had 142 cosponsors. It is anticipated that both bills will be reintroduced early in the 106th Congress (ostensibly by the time you read this article), and both should receive the same widespread congressional backing.

Many state governments also back the bill. They recognize that a uniform federal effort to control the bear parts trade will add to their existing statewide initiatives to protect resident bears. In a 1995 letter, California's Fish and Game Director noted that the bear bill "would be very valuable in protecting bear populations on the North American continent...We believe that California bears are taken to other states and sold." Dayna Matthews, representing the Enforcement Program of Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife added: "Consistency between states and federal agencies...would help in closing the doors and loopholes that currently exist." Ironically, although Idaho is one of the states that allows sale of bear parts and opposes prohibiting interstate commerce within the United States, Idaho's Fish and Game Enforcement Assistant Chief admitted: "We realize that there is some illegal killing of bears promoted by our laws."

With this telling recognition of today's threats to bears and the broad support for aggressive action to protect the remaining bears of the world, there is every expectation that the legislation should pass in the 106th Congress. The Bear Protection Act may not be a panacea, but it will send a strong message that we will not be a willing participant in this unacceptable trade. Without bold, immediate actions, we may witness the extirpation of some wild bear populations in our lifetime. The world community must learn from the historical example of elephants, tigers and rhinos, and act on the bears' behalf before their status becomes critical. 🐾