

Free Malaysia Today

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An Un-bear-able trade

By Stephanie Sta Maria

Louis Ng is no stranger to close encounters with animals in distress. But nothing quite prepared him for the emotional exchange with an adult bear outside a bear farm in Laos.

A film-maker had stumbled upon the farm and contacted Ng, the co-founder and executive director of Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) in Singapore.

When he visited the farm in November 2009, the sight that greeted him was that of a female bear lying motionless in a cage.

The owner explained that she was refusing food and starving herself to death so he had left her outside to meet her inevitable end. Ng crouched near but a safe distance from the cage and watched her.

After a few minutes the bear, who was on her 10th day of hunger strike pushed a limp paw through the cage bars and weakly flexed her claws in Ng's direction. He realised with a start that she was reaching for his hand. And so he gave it to her.

The two "held hands" in silence for a few minutes. Ng remembers the bear's eyes being flooded with both anguish and gentleness. She died the next day.

In a world where dignity is sometimes only delivered by death, this bear was the lucky one. She died after three years of living on that farm. Over 12,000 other bears will serve up to 10 years of their lives in similar farms throughout Asia where they will "contribute" their bile to meet the region's insatiable demand for its healing properties.

Horrific procedure

"This farm had 29 bears in cages just large enough for them to stand up," Ng said. "All you hear when you walk inside is the constant banging of heads against those cages."

Solitude, pain and fear have literally driven the bears mad. Their only outlet is to ram their heads against their tiny prison cells or starve themselves to death.

At this point anything is preferable to the horrific procedure of having their gall bladder drained of bile twice a day to fuel a growing trade.

The medical use of bear bile dates back to the Tang Dynasty in 659 AD. Its only therapeutic component is ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) which makes up 15% to 39% of bile in bears compared to its 5% in humans.

Bear bile was traditionally used for gastric bypass surgery and to treat minor ailments like sore throats, sprains and epilepsy. As the bile was taken from the intact gall bladders of bears killed in the wild, the absence of torture eased consumers' minds.

But the supply was meagre and led to high prices on bear bile medicines. Consumers had also began rejecting bile in pharmaceutical products for its synthetic origins which gave rise to demand for wild-sourced bile from live bears.

In the 1970s, South Korea invented a method of extracting bile from live bears. It was cruel, excruciating and the golden ticket to a booming trade. "The bile is removed from the bear by inserting a catheter tube through a permanent incision in the abdomen and gall bladder," Ng said. "Sometimes a permanently implanted metal tube is used."

Dual role

Imagination eliminates the need to describe the pain that comes with this practice. Most bears are too weak or crazed to protest but those that do face a worse punishment.

"One cub took a swipe at the farmer," Ng said. "The height of its cage was halved so it could only lie on its back."

"It soon started gnawing on its own paw which is what happens when bears lose their minds. Often they end up chewing their own limbs off."

But none of these details reach the ears of the Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese and Malaysian consumers who frequent the 124 Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) shops in Malaysia. A 2010 report by wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC, found that while China is the prime origin for bear bile products in Asia, Malaysia is among a string of Asian countries that play the dual role of producer and consumer.

What most concerns Matt Hunt, chief executive of Free The Bears Fund in Australia, about the report is that a significant number of Malaysia's TCM shops were found to be selling wild-sourced bear gall bladders.

"This means that Sun bears in Malaysian forests are being hunted to feed this trade," he pointed out. "The Sun bears are an important part of Malaysia's forest eco-systems and these traders are robbing future Malaysians of their cultural inheritance."

"The bear bile pills, flakes and ointments in Malaysian TCM shops were found to have originated in Malaysia itself, which is a breach of international agreements on bear trade."

Illegal status

According to Ng, the price of a gall bladder costs as much as a packet of heroin in the black market.

Consumers fork out about RM730 for 127g while one milligram of bile is priced at RM60. Each extraction from a live bear yields 10 milligram of bile.

Malaysian TCM shopowners and staff interviewed by TRAFFIC Malaysia revealed that a majority of the gall bladders sold were wild-sourced and that they were aware of its illegal status.

This ambivalence is bad news for the Asiatic Black bears, Sun bears and Brown bears, the three species who are hunted for their parts.

The Asiatic and Sun bears are already given the “vulnerable” status and the director of TRAFFIC, Chris Shepherd, confirmed that the latter is being killed in Malaysia for local consumption and smuggling.

“Bear farming is also spreading with more farms opening in Laos and Myanmar,” he said.

“TRAFFIC has encouraged a clampdown on TCM outlets and wild meat restaurants in Malaysia but more awareness is needed among consumers.”

“The police and customs departments have to be more involved in combating wildlife trade and you can judge the level of enforcement with the level of open availability of products.”

The single spark of hope for now is surprisingly Laos where bear farming is outlawed and the government reportedly is exercising its political muscle to reverse the cycle.

Rescue centre

Free The Bears Fund and ACRES are currently in talks with the Laotian government on efforts to rescue the bears and eventually close down the many Laotian farms.

“Many more farmers are moving into Laos following the clampdown in their countries,” Ng said. “A second-generation of bear farming is now taking place there. But our work with the government is very positive.”

“I personally don’t think the farmers are born with a cruel hand. They are just poor people who are looking for money and who have grown immune to the condition of those farms.”

Ng is in the midst of setting up a rescue centre in Laos on a five-hectare site with a 12-room building for volunteers and two enclosures measuring one hectare each to accommodate 29 bears.

Not only will the bears be rescued but they will also be put through a rehabilitation process to help them adapt to a community after being in solitary confinement for so long.

The RM1.5-million facility is expected to be ready for volunteers by June. It will be a big step forward on a still long road towards saving Asia’s bear population.

Ng’s passion for animal rights is hardly surprising for someone who received the Outstanding Young Persons of Singapore Award in 2007.

But if you ask him today, he would attribute the current ferocity of his passion to the female bear that he met outside the first Laotian farm.

“Any human treated that way would have spitted at you but this bear offered her paw,” he said quietly. “And her death was the only choice she made for herself in her life. It shouldn’t be in vain.”

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