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Probe into illegal sale of bear parts at Expo

By Victoria Vaughan

A trader is being probed for allegedly selling bear gall bladders at the Singapore Food Expo, which ended on Tuesday.

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) has sent a sample of the suspected product for testing.

Trading in bear parts is illegal because Singapore has signed an agreement banning trade in endangered animals and plants.

No arrests have been made, and the results of the tests will be out in two weeks.

It all began when a member of the public tipped off animal welfare group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) on Tuesday.

Acres officers, at the scene in 30 minutes, went undercover and found out from the vendor, Jilin Senke Trading, that bear gall bladders were allegedly being sold at the expo for \$700 each.

The vendor reportedly said he had only one left and offered to order more from China, where bear farming is legal, said Acres executive director Louis Ng.

Under the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites), bears are protected and all commercial trade in them or their body parts is banned.

The outcome of the AVA's lab test is immaterial. Under the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act, anyone who sells, offers for sale or displays to the public bear parts and products has broken the law - even if the product is fake.

Upon conviction, the person may be fined \$50,000 per species, up to a total of \$500,000, and/or jailed two years.

The most recent case involving bear products was in February last year, when a Chinese national was caught importing 40 vials of bear bile powder from China. He was fined \$2,500.

Ms Anbarasi Boopal, the director of Acres' Wildlife Crime Unit, said: 'This continued trade creates a demand for bear products and fuels the exploitation of bears held in bear farms.'

She was referring to the inhumane practice across Asia of keeping Asiatic black bears and sun bears in tiny cages and milking them for their bile, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

The bears suffer pain when milked through catheters which are rarely, if ever, removed. Many die or develop tumours and infections. When they die, their gall bladders are removed, also for TCM.

An AVA spokesman has urged members of the public who bought bear gall bladders at the expo to call 6227-0670 to surrender the items and provide AVA with information.

She said: 'No action will be taken against the buyer in this instance, and all information provided to AVA would be kept strictly confidential.'

The organisers of the Singapore Food Expo and the Singapore Food Manufacturers Organisation did not respond to queries; the AVA declined comment on its ongoing investigation.

A previous undercover investigation by Acres in 2006 found one in five TCM shops here selling suspected bear products. This was down from a 2001 study, which found three-quarters of such shops selling them.