

Bear Farming

An endangered species behind bars



Today in Korea, nearly 1600 bears are raised and kept in farms, forced to live in unnaturally cramped and squalid conditions, where they are “milked” for bile and slaughtered for body parts. The number of bears held captive in farms is a stark and pitiful contrast to wild moon bears in Korea, which are all but extinct.

Fueling this cruel practice is the rampant demand for bear bile, a key ingredient in traditional medicines of many Asian countries. More expensive than gold, bear bile is considered a cure-all and is widely prescribed as a treatment for a range of ailments, including liver and gall bladder disease. Overall, the worldwide trade in bear parts is estimated to be a \$2 Billion industry. Though a vast majority of Koreans are opposed to bear farming, South Korea is home to some of the most devoted consumers willing to pay the highest prices for bear products. Despite the wide availability and affordability of synthetic alternatives, trade in authentic bear bile means big business. Small packets of extracted bile sell for 200,000 to 250,000 Korean won (\$200-\$250), while a whole bear gall bladder can fetch as much as \$20,000.

The use of bear bile in traditional medicine has been going on for

centuries, and over time nearly all bear species in Asia have seen their numbers reduced in direct correlation to the bile trade. In Korea, the once abundant moon bear has been poached to near extinction. Estimated populations of wild moon bears in Korea declined from 56 bears in 1980 to just 21 bears in 2001. Most recently, the government has been importing and releasing moon bears in a protected area at Jiri Mountain in an attempt to preserve the species. They plan to continue importing bears, pledging to increase numbers to 30 by 2008, but even in this area, protection is difficult—one of the bears has already been found dead in a trap, while other evidence of poaching activity abounds.

Role of the Korean Government

Bear farming in Korea and other Asian countries grew during the 1980’s in response to the dwindling supply of bear parts obtained from bears hunted in the wild. Since then, the Korean government has struggled to balance the interests of Korean bear farmers with international pressures for environmental conservation.

In the early 1980’s, the Korean government encouraged the import of 400 bears to begin breeding and export programs, but in 1985 banned the importation in response to international criticism. Later in 1993, South Korea joined CITES, banning international trade of bear gall. But CITES does not regulate domestic trade in products obtained from captive animals, and the last twenty years have only seen an

increase in bear farming. Similarly, the process of “milked” bile from live bears is technically illegal in Korea, but is believed to be widely practiced and rarely policed.

In response to criticism from environmentalists, bear farming advocates argue that breeding bears in farms eases pressure on wildlife, reducing the threat of poaching, and slowing the decline of the moon bear. But poaching appears to be as active as ever, with some consumers believing that a whole gall bladder from a wild bear is more potent than bile obtained from farmed bears.

Equally troubling is the Korean government’s stance on regulating bear farming practices. Most recently in 2005, Korea’s Ministry of Environment introduced the Bear Farm Administration Index, aiming to provide the proper guidelines for the handling of bears in captivity. However, the Index



Cages in Korean bear farms are larger than in China, but are usually filthy and often used to house multiple bears, violating Ministry regulations.

Photos Courtesy: AnimalsAsia Foundation

does less to protect bears than it does to protect the interests of bear farmers, and introduced a policy greatly reducing the minimum age for slaughter from 24 to just 10 years. Ironically, this policy was enacted by the same Ministry currently attempting to restore wild moon bears at Jiri Mountain.

Korean Bear Farms

Despite the near extinction of Korean moon bears in the wild, the numbers of bears kept in farms continues to increase. According to the last report, 110 bear farms operate in Korea, and 85.3% of farmed bears are endangered moon bears. It is also believed that the true number of bears and bear farms is much higher than those reported.

Conditions at most bear farms fall far below the standards set by the Ministry of Environment. Bears are kept in small, dirty cages where they are fed pig slop rather than their natural diet of fruits and plants. The Ministry does not carry out regular inspections of the farms and it is believed that bears are slaughtered much younger than 10 years of age and that it is often done inhumanely.

The outlook is equally horrifying for bears which are kept alive. Bile is extracted by making an incision into the bear's abdomen and placing a permanent catheter attached to the gall bladder. When the bile is not being extracted, the site is covered by a lock and steel plate to prevent tampering, both by bears and would-be thieves. The process is rarely performed by a veterinarian and often becomes infected and left untreated, contaminating the extracted bile with pus and detritus.

Signs of physical and mental anguish wear heavily on the bears, who are observed spinning circles in their cages, gnawing on bars and engaging in self-mutilation. Some of this behavior stems from the caged bears' inability to hibernate during Korea's cold winters, a behavior so deeply rooted in the animal's instinct but impossible on a bear farm. In some of the worst farms, bears are not only deprived of exercise and their ability to hibernate, but also sunlight. Worse still is the separation of mother and cub which happens at as young as 3 months of age, far younger than they would separate in the wild.

What You Can Do

Please help IAKA to call upon Korea's Ministry of Environment to end the suffering of bears and begin an immediate ban on bear products. It is through the Korean government's actions that bear farms began in the 1980's and it is time for them to take responsibility for their mistakes and start making a concentrated effort towards conservation.

Rather than importing moon bears from Russia and other countries to preserve a species, Korea needs to pay attention to the bears already suffering within its borders, and to ensure that the bears can again live naturally in the wild without threats of poaching.

Please send the enclosed petition card and write personal letters to the Ministry of Environment, calling for an immediate end to bear farming.

Also visit www.moonbears.org to sign the online petition from g. moon.

Tell the Korean Government to:

- Ban all farming, shut down existing farms and offer compensation packages to farmers
- Establish a properly funded bear sanctuary at Jiri Mountain where the farmed bears can be released, monitored and properly cared for
- Ban all DOMESTIC trade in bear parts in addition to international trade
- Educate the public about synthetic bear gall alternatives and about conservation of the environment

Please send petition cards and letters of protest to :

**Minister Lee Chi-beom
Ministry of Environment
Government Complex-Gwacheon 1, Joongang-dong,
Gwacheon-si, Gyeonggi-do, 427-729 Korea**

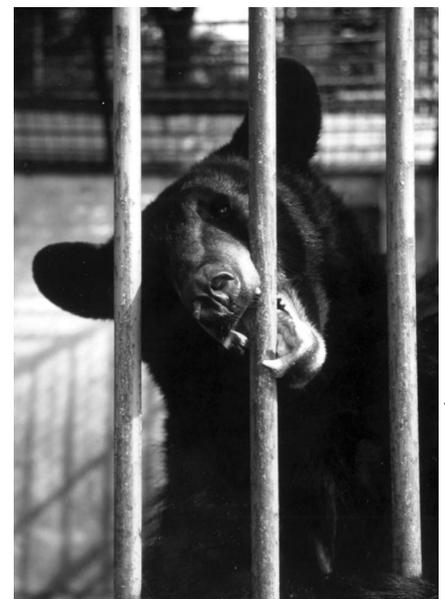


Photo Courtesy: AnimalAsia Foundation

A farmed bear gnaws on the bars of his cage... a sign this bear has lost his mind from the years spent tortured in captivity.