

## ALTERNATIVELY EFFECTIVE: A CONFERENCE ON SUBSTITUTES TO BEAR BILE IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE IN MALAYSIA

Report by Lalita Gomez

**S**un Bears *Helarctus malayanus* in Malaysia face an uncertain future owing to the threat they face from illegal hunting, primarily driven by the demand for their parts for use in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). In 2010, TRAFFIC assessed the scale and availability of bear parts in 13 countries and territories across Asia, and Malaysia was flagged both as a key source and consumer of bear bile medicines. In 2012, a country-wide assessment of the bear bile trade in Malaysia by TRAFFIC revealed that almost half (48%) of TCM shops surveyed openly claimed to be selling and/or displayed gall bladder and/or bile that they claimed to be authentic. Furthermore, nearly 60% of all gall bladders observed for sale were reportedly sourced locally, a significant finding that demonstrates the vulnerability of Sun Bears—the only species of bear in the country—to being targeted for the use of their body parts in TCM. In 2014, TRAFFIC assessed bear seizures that had taken place across Asia between 2000 and 2011 and again Malaysia came out in the top five of 17 countries assessed in the illegal bear trade.

Recent poaching and seizure incidents as well as recent research by TRAFFIC continues to highlight the risks and emerging threats to the survival of Sun Bears in Malaysia. At least ten bears were killed—or were about to be before being rescued—for their parts in the eastern State of Sabah between 2015 and March 2017. Similar hunting pressure persists in Peninsular Malaysia, with documented cases in the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex (BTFC) where TRAFFIC and WWF-Malaysia have ongoing conservation programmes and where the use of guns and wire snares to trap bears and other wildlife has been observed. These incidents reveal the persistent and unrelenting threat to wild bear populations in Malaysia, despite their protection status in the country. The Sun Bear is a protected species in Malaysia—totally protected in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, and protected in Sarawak, meaning that hunting and trade is prohibited.

The prevalence of the Sun Bear trade in Malaysia prompted TRAFFIC, in collaboration with the Federation of Chinese Physicians and Medicine Dealers Association of Malaysia (FCPMDAM), to organize a one-day conference for practitioners of traditional medicine throughout the country.

This conference formed part of TRAFFIC's collaboration with the TCM industry in the country, which began in 2015 to reduce and ultimately stop the use of bears and other illegally sourced wildlife in traditional medicine treatments. The aim of the conference—entitled *Alternatively Effective*—was two-fold: to raise awareness of the alternatives to bear-based



**President of the Federation of Chinese Physicians and Medicine Dealers Association of Malaysia (FCPMDAM), Mr Ting Ka Hua, signing the pledge in support of the use of legally sourced wildlife ingredients.**

medicines and other wildlife parts used in TCM in order to alleviate the pressure on wild bear populations in Malaysia and neighbouring countries; and to encourage traditional medicine practitioners to use only legal wildlife resources.

About 80 practitioners, physicians, TCM lecturers and government officials attended the conference that also saw presentations from TRAFFIC, Dr Yibin Feng, Associate Director at the University of Hong Kong's School of Chinese Medicine, and Salman Saaban, Enforcement Director of Peninsular Malaysia's Department of Wildlife and National Parks.

TRAFFIC highlighted the scale of the threat to Asian bear species in general and specifically the threats to the Sun Bear from the bear bile trade in Malaysia, as is evident from the continued availability of bear bile products in the TCM retail market. A recent survey (June 2017) by TRAFFIC of over 100 TCM outlets in the Klang Valley (i.e. includes Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and State of Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia), revealed that more than half (76%) of these outlets sold bear bile products. These were mostly in the form of pills, reported by retailers as either pure or mixed with herbs and other animal bile. Some retailers openly displayed/advertised the availability of such products including products from China and South Korea, and at least one retailer offered to obtain bear gall bladders if there was a buyer.

Dr Feng, a specialist on substitutes for endangered species used as medicines, spoke to practitioners about his latest research on the various herbal alternatives to bear bile. He claimed the herbs, Chinese Goldthread *Coptis chinensis* (also known as *huanglian*) and some *Berberis* spp. are just as effective if not more so than bear bile in

► treating liver diseases, including cancer, and described the herbs as having better “anti-cancer invasion” and “anti-cancer metastasis” effects than bear bile, with, for example, up to 80% of cancer cells killed off following application of *huanglian* in comparison to 10–50% with bear bile.

Salman Saaban, the Enforcement Director with the Department of Wildlife and Natural Parks in Peninsular Malaysia, talked to participants about the laws in the country as they relate to the practice of traditional medicine and wildlife that can legally be used for such purposes. He also stressed the importance of strengthening the relationship between enforcement authorities and the TCM industry through open dialogues with practitioners throughout the country as a means to educate and raise awareness on the legality of using and selling wildlife products.

In closing, the president of the FCPMDAM stressed the responsibility that practitioners bear in cherishing and protecting wild resources. He reiterated the importance of supporting the efforts to end the use of illegal and endangered wildlife products in traditional medicine within the Malaysian Chinese traditional medicine community. Importantly, he urged practitioners to correct unfounded and inaccurate claims of the efficacy of wildlife used in traditional medicine and warned against any unlawful activity.

More than half of the participants present signed a declaration of support to use only wildlife permitted under Malaysia’s laws, to use only legally sourced ingredients and to support efforts to reduce the demand for wildlife-based medicinal products involving threatened species. It is hoped this translates into a commitment by practitioners to source and dispense responsibly wild animals and plants used for medicines and to educate their customers about sustainable alternatives, which will help to reduce the tremendous pressure on bears and many other wild animals now in demand as ingredients in traditional medicine preparations.

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## Complementary approaches: the role in tackling illegal wildlife trade

Report by Sabri Zain, Roland Melisch and Anastasiya Timoshyna

Recent decades have seen increasing global attention on the links between species conservation and sustainable management of wild fauna and flora. As far back as 1971, complementary approaches of protection and sustainable use of biodiversity was reflected in the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat—better known as the Ramsar Convention<sup>1</sup>—where the term “wise use” was employed. At the momentous Rio Summit in 1992, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)<sup>2</sup> was forged, with its first objective focused on “conservation” and the second on “sustainable use”. Article 8 of the Convention calls for the respect, preservation and maintenance of knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, and Article 10 focuses exclusively on sustainable use of biodiversity. The Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable use of Biodiversity (Anon., 2004) adopted by the Parties to the Convention in 2004 provide an additional framework to assist resource managers in ensuring that their use of biodiversity will not lead to a long-term decline.

In 2010, the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP10) to the CBD endorsed the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and Aichi Biodiversity Targets<sup>3</sup>. These have been accepted by other Conventions and sectors as a useful global framework to conserve, restore, and use biodiversity sustainably and to enhance its benefits to people. At CoP11 in Hyderabad, India, in 2012, the CBD agreed, for the first time, to 19 recommendations (CBD, 2012) on the harvesting and sustainable use of wild animals for food and non-food purposes, including for medicinal use.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 66/288 *The Future We Want* (UN General Assembly, 2012) later supported “mainstreaming the consideration of the socio-economic impacts and benefits of the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity ... into relevant programmes and policies at all levels” and encouraged investments “which support the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity”.

<sup>1</sup>The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: [http://archive.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-texts-convention-on/main/ramsar/1-31-38%5E20671\\_4000\\_0\\_](http://archive.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-texts-convention-on/main/ramsar/1-31-38%5E20671_4000_0_); <sup>2</sup>Convention on Biological Diversity: <https://www.cbd.int/convention/text/default.shtml>  
<sup>3</sup>Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and Aichi Biodiversity Targets: <https://www.cbd.int/doc/strategic-plan/2011-2020/Aichi-Targets-EN.pdf>