



Original Research Article

A review of bear farming and bear trade in Lao People's Democratic Republic

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the bear farming industry in Lao PDR with the objective of documenting the current number of commercial bear facilities (i.e. captive bear facilities judged to be trading in bear bile and/or bears and bear parts) and the number of bears contained within these facilities, noting changes since it was last examined between 2000 and 2012 by Livingstone and Shepherd (2014). We surveyed all known commercial bear facilities and searched for previously unrecorded facilities. We compared our records with Livingstone and Shepherd (2014) and corrected some duplicate records from their study. In 2017, we recorded seven commercial facilities; four dedicated bear farms, and three tiger farms that were reportedly also keeping bears. We found that between 2012 and 2017 the recorded number of dedicated bear farms reduced by two, and the recorded number of tiger farms also keeping bears increased by one. Within the same period, the total number of captive bears among all facilities in Lao PDR hardly changed (+one), but the number of bears within each facility did. The northern facilities, owned by ethnic Chinese, have expanded since 2012, and central and southern facilities have downsized or closed. While bear farming appears to be downsizing in Lao PDR overall, efforts to phase it out are undermined by the expansion of foreign owned facilities in the north, within Special and Specific Economic Zones that largely cater to a Chinese market, and where the Lao government's efforts to enforce laws and protect wildlife appear to be lacking. Closing the facilities in the north will require political will and decisive law enforcement.

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1. Introduction

The practice of keeping bears captive for live bile extraction, commonly known as “bear farming”, has expanded throughout Asia since the 1980's (Servheen et al., 1999). Bile, taken from the gallbladders of bears, has been used in Traditional Medicine in East Asia for more than 1000 years as a treatment for a wide range of inflammatory and degenerative ailments (Feng et al., 2009; Li et al., 2016). Current trends indicate that the bear farming industry is shrinking in some countries and increasing in others. Recent shifts in public attitudes and government policies, however, have cast uncertainty on the sustainability of this industry. In South Korea, where the number of bears in captive facilities once surpassed 1000 (World Animal Protection, 2017), the government has begun sterilizing all remaining captive bears on bile-extraction facilities (est. 660 bile

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producing bears in 2017) in their efforts to phase out the industry (World Animal Protection, 2017; K. Kukreja, personal Communication, 2017). Similarly in Vietnam, a government ban on live bile extraction from captive bears implemented in 2006 has since seen a decrease of over 70% in the numbers of captive bears, from 4000 to 1200 (Animals Asia, 2011; Crudge et al., 2016; Willcox et al., 2016; ENV, 2017). However, Japan's 'bear parks', which reportedly trade in bear bile products, hold more than 1000 bears, and may be expanding through breeding and from orphaned cubs (Foley et al., 2011; Mills and Servheen, 1991; Togawa and Sakamoto, 2002). In China, the world's biggest producer and consumer of bear bile, there are currently more than 20,000 bears in captivity (Jiwen and Shenzhen, 2016). Facilities in China peaked at around 400 and then declined to less than 100 following a tightening of China's industry regulations in the 1990's, as many small-scale farms (<50 bears) consolidated into larger facilities (Animals Asia, 2011; Jiwen and Shenzhen, 2016). The available estimates from China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam amount to more than 23,000 captive bears in these countries combined.

The international bear bile industry is largely driven by demand from China, as well as Chinese international tourists and ethnic Chinese communities in other countries, such as Australia, Europe, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand and Singapore (Williamson, 2006; Burgess et al., 2014; Ling et al., 2015). Following a tightening of China's domestic regulations on bear farming (Jiwen and Shenzhen, 2016), within the last two decades bear bile businesses have opened in neighbouring Lao PDR and Myanmar, run by Chinese entrepreneurs who presumably moved across the border to remain close to their main consumers while leveraging the benefits of low government restrictions and weak law enforcement in these lower-income countries (Livingstone and Shepherd, 2014; BANCA, 2017; Nijman et al., 2017). Bear bile trade also operates visibly within several trading hotspots around China's borders, such as the Golden Triangle region (overlapping Myanmar, Lao PDR and Thailand; Fig. 1). In these trading hotspots, the consumer base is largely Chinese tourists attracted by gambling, drugs, prostitution and other trading activities that are illegal in China (Shepherd and Nijman, 2008; EIA, 2015; BANCA, 2017). The captive bear bile industries in Lao PDR and Myanmar are still relatively small, compared with other bile producing countries, with recent records indicating less than 200 captive bears in each country (BANCA, 2017; Livingstone and Shepherd, 2014).

Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*) are protected globally as Appendix I Species under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES; Garshelis and Steinmetz, 2016), and are classed as 'Vulnerable'

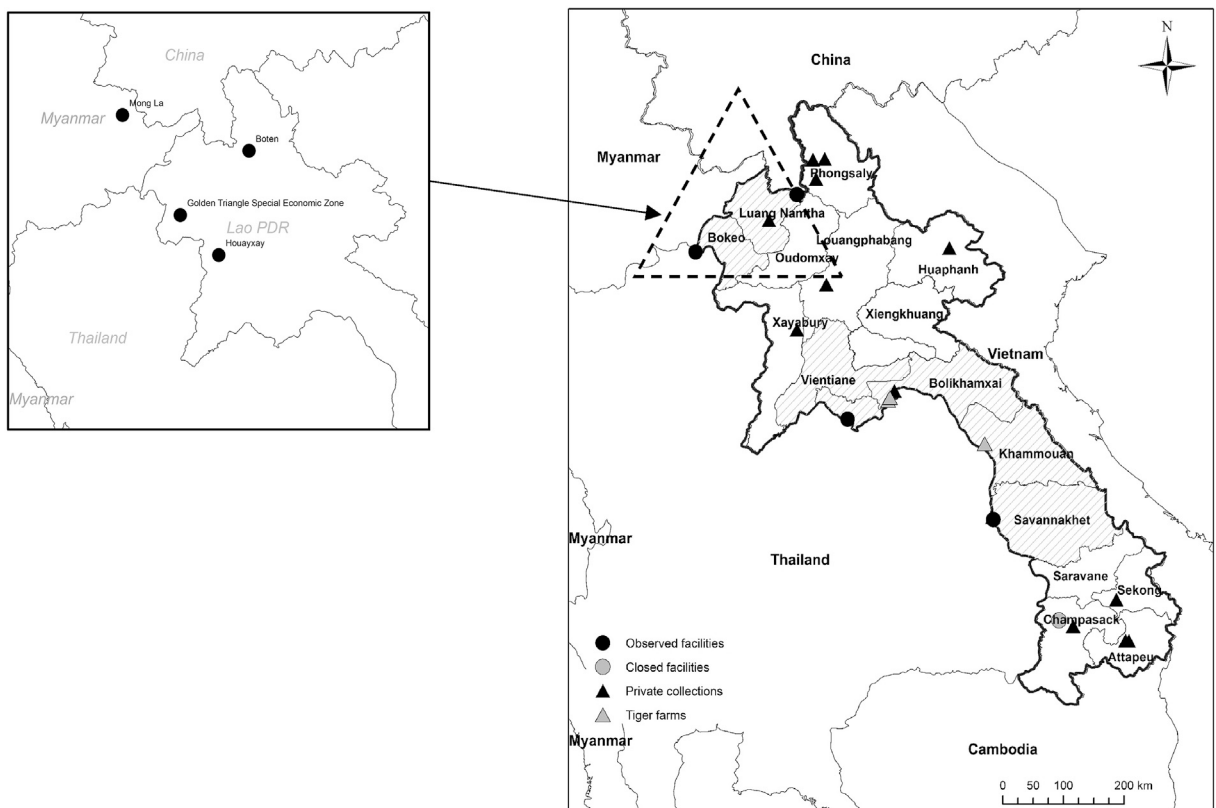


Fig. 1. Locations of recorded bear farms (including facilities found to be closed during our survey), tiger farms and private bear collections in Lao PDR. Excludes bears held within a rescue centre in Louangphabang and in Vientiane Zoo. We searched for facilities in 17 out of 18 Provinces, all except Xaisomboun. Provinces with Special and/or Specific Economic Zones are shaded in grey. Towns and zones within the Golden Triangle region that are mentioned in our report are indicated topleft and within the dashed triangle; this region is a bear bile trading hotspot, catering to Chinese international tourists pursuing activities that are illegal in China (e.g. drugs, gambling, prostitution, endangered wildlife trade).

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