

Illegal Trade

Sun Bear Snaring Highlights an Enforcement Bane in the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex, Malaysia

Kanitha Krishnasamy
Senior Programme Officer,
TRAFFIC Southeast Asia
Email: kanitha.krishnasamy@traffic.org

Or Oi Ching
Belum Temengor Project Officer,
TRAFFIC Southeast Asia
Email: or.oiching@traffic.org

The sun bear, found in forests throughout Malaysia, is targeted for use in traditional Chinese medicine and for consumption as wild meat; the latter has been increasingly reported in the country. TRAFFIC's research on the availability of bear bile products in the traditional Chinese medicine trade in 2010 ranked Malaysia as 4th in this trade (Foley et al. 2011). The sun bear is listed in Appendix I of CITES, which effectively means that all international commercial trade in sun bears or their parts and products is illegal.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the sun bear is accorded total protection under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010, meaning that it cannot be hunted, kept or traded without a special permit issued by the Director-General of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (DWNP). Anyone convicted of a crime relating to a sun bear (including those involving a female or juvenile animal, which carries a heavier penalty) is punishable by a fine of up to MYR 300,000 (USD 96,700) or prison term of up to 10 years, or both.

Despite this degree of protection, sun bears face tremendous pressures from illegal hunting and trade. This is evidenced by several recent cases of sun bears being snared in one of the largest forested landscapes in Peninsular Malaysia, the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex. This Complex, situated in northern Peninsular Malaysia, shares an international border with Thailand. It is one of Malaysia's most significant conservation areas, recognised worldwide for its richness in wildlife, including sun bears, elephants, gaur, serow, pangolin, hornbills and many more. This forest complex is also identified as one of the country's priority tiger conservation areas under the National Tiger Conservation Action Plan (Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia 2008). Approximately 40% (117,500 ha) of this 300,000 ha forest complex is legally gazetted as a State Park - a totally protected area. The remaining areas consist primarily of Forest Reserves, which serve both for protection (e.g. watershed and soil protection) and production (e.g. timber extraction). This includes the Gerik-Jeli Highway buffer area, a 124-km long stretch of road that bisects the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex that is used by poachers as the primary point of access into the forest.

Unfortunately, the vast biological richness has rendered this area a target for illegal hunters and traders. Snaring, a widespread threat to wildlife throughout tropical Asia, has left its mark here as well. In January 2014, a WWF-Malaysia researcher working in the area stumbled upon a sun bear carcass in a wire snare after checking a trail close to the Gerik-Jeli Highway, where several men on motorcycles had been seen emerging from the forest. The rotting sun bear carcass was found with



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Snared sun bear that was eventually freed and released.



Sun bear carcass found with limb caught in a snare (left), its severed paw nearby (middle), and the active snare (right) in the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex, northern Malaysia. Photos: TRAFFIC/WWF-Malaysia.

a limb still caught in a snare and one of its paws severed nearby. Further exploration around the area revealed four more snares. This was reported to the authorities immediately for further investigation. Five days after this incident, the DWNP conducted a snare-sweeping operation in the area and found eight more snares of which six were set. All were removed by the DWNP.

Four weeks before, in December 2013, WWF researchers found a live sun bear with its forelimb caught in a snare just 250 m off the Gerik-Jeli Highway. Swift action by the DWNP led to the injured animal being treated and freed after a 2-hour long, 10-man operation. Bullet wounds were found on the bear, indicating that it had been targeted by poachers. Authorities are continuing their investigation into this case.

In a separate incident in the area in April 2013, a captive juvenile sun bear was confiscated by the DWNP. This animal was being kept illegally in a small wooden box by an indigenous community, claimed to be for tourism purposes. The rescued animal was sent to a wildlife rehabilitation centre, while the villagers in question were issued a warning. No charges were filed.

In August 2011, a WWF camera trap in the area captured the image of a sun bear without a forelimb. The animal is suspected of having lost the limb in a snare. WWF-Malaysia's researchers carrying out wildlife sign surveys in the area found 12 freshly-set snares over 3-week period.

In relation to these three sun bear snaring incidents, 27 snares have been found and removed over an 18-month period since August 2011. Snares are clearly a plague in the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex: in addition to sun bears, numerous other species have been found ensnared in this forest complex, including tigers, Asian golden cat, and various ungulates.

The Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 prohibits anyone from possessing or using snares. Anyone found in possession of a snare is presumed to be using it for the purposes of hunting and if convicted, is liable for a fine of up to MYR 100,000 (USD 32,260) or a prison term of up to 3 years, or both. Those caught placing or using a snare face a minimum fine of MYR 50,000 (USD 16,130) and a mandatory prison sentence of up to 2 years.

These discoveries highlight the need for more frequent patrols by law enforcement agencies to rid the forests of snares. Investigations need to be carried out so that legal action can be taken against those setting the snares. Support from the public is equally important to provide timely information about wildlife crime to enforcement agencies to help them eradicate illegal wildlife hunting, which is draining the rich wildlife from this area.

Acknowledgements

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Alan Tham

A caged juvenile sun bear in the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex.



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Three-legged sun bear caught on a WWF camera-trap, along with snares found in the area (inset).

