

NEW STUDY SHOWS THAT, WITH THE RIGHT HELP, BEARS CAN RECOVER FROM THE STRESS OF BILE FARMING

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Research shows humane treatment can reverse chronic stress

Asiatic black bears face chronic stress in bile farms and one of the major threats to their declining population is bear bile farms, fuelled by the increasing demands for bear bile and bear parts for use in traditional Chinese medicine.

Across Asia, multiple countries engage in bear farming and as many as 12,000 bears have been estimated to be housed in both illegal and legal bear farms. Though some farms rely on captive breeding, many still depend on the capture of wild bears to support trade and risk natural populations. The welfare of bears on these farms is generally considered very poor because bears are housed in small cages where they lack social or other forms of enrichment, receive poor nutrition, are exposed to surgical trauma and have a high risk of disease. They are “milked” through permanent holes in their side that allow bile to be extracted from the gall bladder.

Consequently, bears are often thought to be highly stressed, but the limited access to these facilities has made it difficult to quantify the extent of this stress. A paper, recently published in the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare’s Journal *Animal Welfare* has shed light on this issue and the authors provide some encouraging results which indicate that rescued bile-farm bears are less stressed than bears in farms.

Dr Edward Narayan a Senior Lecturer of Animal Science at the Western Sydney University, Australia, who led the study, worked with the international welfare organisation Animals Asia to investigate the success of that organisations’ rehabilitation, and whether rescued bears can recover from their experiences.

The rescued bears used in the study were given special veterinary care and integrated into the bear sanctuary after several months of careful physiological and behavioural assessments. The study was able to check the bears stress levels throughout by measuring the cortisol levels in their faeces. Stress hormones like cortisol help regulate the metabolism, especially in times of short-term or acute stress such as “fight or flight” situations. In normal situations, sharp stress causes an increase of cortisol that allows an animal to react quickly to a dangerous situation. Once the danger passes, cortisol production reduces. Bears at bile farms in Vietnam have significantly higher levels of stress hormones than bears living in sanctuaries - the first scientific evidence of the chronic stress created by bear bile farming.

Chronic stress can lead to harmful changes in the stress endocrine system and long-term cortisol overproduction weakens the body's ability to fend off daily challenges, and increases the risk of disease and death. In humans, chronic stress contributes to problems with the cardiovascular, immune and central nervous systems.

Dr Narayan said: *“Chronic stress is a massive challenge for the successful rehabilitation of animals into their new environment. Careful monitoring of stress is essential in animal rescue and translocation programs because it can provide information on the physiological resilience of each animal, and help rescuers understand how the animals might respond to humane interventions and veterinary checks. Our data shows that although not all bears fully recover from living on a bile farm, they generally manage to reduce their stress hormone levels under the rehabilitation programme.”*

Dr Narayan added: *“Stress research has shown humane treatment can reverse chronic stress – and our study has found that is true even for animals who have experienced intolerable treatment.”*

Further information

Subscribers to the Animal Welfare Journal will find this paper (*Evaluating physiological stress in Asiatic black bears (Ursus thibetanus) rescued from bile farms in Vietnam*) in Volume 27 issue 4. The full abstract of the study can be read at UFAW's website <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/the-ufaw-journal/animal-welfare>.

If you wish to read the full paper, you can visit [ingentaconnect.com](http://www.ingentaconnect.com) to access the paper for \$25 (US) plus taxes.
<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/ufaw/aw/2018/00000027/00000004/art00001>

Those purchasing the paper or choosing to subscribe to the Animal Welfare journal will be supporting UFAW's work.
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Media contact: Dr Robert Hubrecht, Chief Executive and Scientific Director, UFAW.
Tel: 01582-831818, email hubrecht@ufaw.org.uk

Note to editors:

Although the practice of bear-bile farming became illegal in Vietnam from 1992, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development reported in 2015 that 1,245 bears were kept in small-scale bear-bile farms in Vietnam. As bear-bile farming is a sensitive issue, access to these “farms” is extremely limited, resulting in a lack of

systematic examinations of the bear-bile farming industry and its effects on the farmed bears physiology.

A key initiative, alongside legislation to outlaw bear-bile farming, is for government or non-government organisations to remove incarcerated bears and relocate them into designated sanctuaries that offer considerably better environmental conditions and the provision of routine veterinary care.

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

UFAW improves animal welfare worldwide through its programme of awards, grants and scholarships; by educational initiatives, especially at university and college level; by providing information in books, videos, reports and in its scientific journal *Animal Welfare*; by providing expert advice to governments and others, including for legislation and 'best practice' guidelines and codes; and by working with animal keepers, scientists, vets, lawyers and all those who care about animals.

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