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SAVING SUN BEARS

By Jeffrey Roberson

Of the eight bear species, sun bears have the dubious distinction of being the least studied, and possibly being amongst the most endangered. Sometimes called “honey bears” or Malayan sun bears, this relatively diminutive species has a coat that can range from red-to-black, and typically sports a yellowish crest on their chest which can resemble a setting sun – hence their name. Sun bears also have freakishly long – but very cool – tongues that are used to extract honey or insects from difficult to reach spots.

Unfortunately, sun bears face numerous threats throughout their range in the lowland tropical forests of Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar (Burma). Sun bear numbers, as with those of the other bear species in Southeast Asia (the Asiatic black bear and the sloth bear), are rapidly decreasing due to the intense pressure exerted by rapidly expanding human populations. Humans cut down the bears’ forest homes for timber or to make room for agriculture. These timber practices are destroying sun bear habitat and sources of food, as well as fragmenting bear populations. The proliferation of plantations in bear habitat is also increasing the chances of human-bear contact as the bears exploit this new food source – typically resulting in sun bears being destroyed to prevent crop damage or simply out of fear. Sun bears are also being exploited for the pet-trade, or killed for food or sale of bear parts, especially for the gall bladder for use in traditional medicines.

All of these threats are compounded by the fact that basic scientific information is sorely lacking on the magnitude of and solution to these threats to sun bears. Without a complete picture of sun bear needs, it will be impossible to implement an action plan to save the species in the wild.

Luckily, a unique and wide-ranging consortium of partners are banding together to help this charismatic but not-well known species. The effort started with a group of participants from the Emerging Wildlife Conservation Leaders (EWCL) initiative. The EWCL project is a collaborative effort between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Defenders of Wildlife, and White Oak Conservation Center/Howard Gilman Foundation. It brings together twenty young conservationists with exceptional leadership potential for capacity building and intense training in campaign development and leadership skills. In return for this training, the leaders are charged with creating and implementing an international wildlife effort to conserve an imperiled species.

Fortunately for the sun bear, the 2005-2006 EWCL class chose to focus their projects on conserving the bears of Southeast Asia, and one group of four* decided to help the sun bear in particular. These emerging leaders partnered with Defenders of Wildlife and the IUCN Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, and found two exciting on-the-ground conservationists to work with: Ph.D. candidates ST Wong and Gabriella Frediksson. ST Wong is conducting critical research to determine the distribution and conservation needs of sun bears in Malaysia. This research would be the first of its kind to map the entire range of the sun bear in Malaysia and to determine what efforts need to be undertaken to save those bears. Meanwhile, Gabriella Frediksson is creating a Malayan Sun Bear Education Center at a community environmental education facili-

ty in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. This community center will educate the local population on wise environmental management and the importance of conservation, and promote the appreciation of the Malayan sun bear as a flagship wilderness species.

After solidifying their plans to work with ST and Gabriella, the EWCL leaders then went to their next most obvious potential partners: Association of Zoos & Aquariums members. The Sun Bear Species Survival Plan group, under the leadership of Cheryl Frederick at the Woodland Park Zoological Gardens and with assistance from SSP Educator Grant Spickelmier at the Minnesota Zoological Garden, was able to advise on the proposal and provide official endorsement of the EWCL proposal seeking support for Gabriella and ST’s projects from AZA institutions.

The next step was to take the proposal to the different zoos exhibiting sun bears and see if they would be willing to provide support. In return for their contribution to these two important sun bear field efforts, the EWCL participants, Gabriella and ST developed Sun Bear Adventure Journals to provide to all supporting institutions. The Adventure Journals combine exciting educational articles and photos to illustrate what sun bear conservation really means on the ground, as well as provide big-picture insight into conservation issues for bears, and for other species of Southeast Asia. Any zoo or organization that provides a contribution can distribute the Adventure Journals to the institution’s members, employees, and constituents to keep them informed of the innovative work the institution is undertaking to help sun bears in the field.

At the time this article is being written, two zoos have already pledged to support the sun bear conservation field projects. Both the Oregon Zoo and the Little Rock Zoo will be partnering in this initiative and will be receiving the Sun Bear Adventure Journals to distribute to their patrons and staff. Additionally, two other AZA accredited institutions have made generous contributions to ST and Gabriella’s sun bear projects being promoted by EWCL: Disney’s Animal Kingdom through the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, and Busch Gardens and Sea World through the Busch Gardens-Sea World Conservation Fund.

With this vast array of government, academic, not-for-profit, corporate, and zoo partners, the initial EWCL effort has turned into a strong alliance of diverse institutions that all wish to contribute to saving sun bears. All these organizations will be playing a role in supporting two outstanding projects designed to fill the fundamental research and education gap for the sun bear, and increase the species chance for survival in the future. So while sun bears face serious threats in the wild, with such a large number of passionate groups and individuals advocating on their behalf, hopefully their battle for survival will be a little easier.

If your institution is interested in joining with this wide group of partners to support sun bear conservation on the ground and receive Sun Bear Adventure journals for distribution to your constituents, please contact Julia Byrd at juliabyrd1978@juno.com.

* *The Saving Sun Bears EWCL group is made up of Julia Byrd of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Erin Harper of SeaWorld/Busch Gardens, Jeffrey Roberson of EPA, and Alison Styring of Evergreen State College.*

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