

Chapter 4

The Status and Conservation of Bears in Bangladesh

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There are three species of bears in Bangladesh: Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), sun bears (*Ursus malayanus*) and sloth bears (*Melursus ursinus*).

The presence of bears in western Bengal and from Madhupur Gar, the Garo hills of the Greater Mymensingh district, and Rangpur and Pabna districts was reported beginning in the late 18th century by several researchers (Buchanan 1833; Hunter 1876; Vas 1911; Strong 1912; Khan, 1990). However, bears were extirpated there due to habitat destruction caused by the expansion of human settlement and agricultural land at the beginning of 19th century.

Threats to bear populations are still increasing because of the expansion of human populations, and resultant over-exploitation of bear habitat and of bears themselves. However, little study has been done so far on any bear species in Bangladesh. In this report, I summarize information from my own research since 1970, extensive interviews with local people, and the literature. I expect this report to promote further research and conservation activities in Bangladesh.

Status

Distribution

Asiatic black bears: Asiatic black bears are called bhaluk in Bengali, and kala harin by tribal people such as Maghs, Chakmas, Firinghi, and Garos. The number of wild Asiatic black bears in Bangladesh has not been estimated, but is recognized to be few, and is designated in the 3rd Schedule of Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) (Amendment) Act of 1974. It is an endangered species in Bangladesh (IUCN 2000).

The species is distributed in the protected areas of Pabla Khali Wildlife Sanctuary, Rangamati, Kaptai National Park of Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the reserved forests of non-protected areas of Kassalong, Khagrachory, Bandarban, Dulahazra, Nykongchari, Teknaf and the Cox's Bazar in the Greater Chittagong district and occasionally in the Garo Hills of Greater Mymensingh district (O'Malley 1909; Haque 1986; Sarker and

Sarker 1988; Khan 1990, 1992, Fig.4.1). Black bears have recently been reported from bamboo clusters and tea gardens of Banchara, Srimangal, and Upazilla of the Moulavibazar district (Fig.4.1).

Sun bears: Sun bears are called chata bhalluk by local people (e.g. Muslim, Hindu), and called kala harin by tribal people such as Maghs, Chakmas, and Garos. There is consensus that few sun bears occupy Bangladesh. Thus, it is designated as Schedule 3 by Bangladesh Preservation Act of 1974, and critically endangered nationally (IUCN 2000).

Sun bears are reported to inhabit the protected areas of the Pabla Khali wildlife Sanctuary and Kaptai National Park, and the non-protected areas of forest reserves of Kassalong of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Khan 1982; Haque 1986, Fig.4.1). I also observed this species in Korerhat of Mirsarai, and local people reported its presence from Sangu-Matamuhuri, Naikongchori, Dulahazra Cox's Bazar, Inani, Rangkeong, and Teknaf of Chittagong. It is occasionally reported from the Garo Hills of Sherpur and Netrokona (Haque 1986;

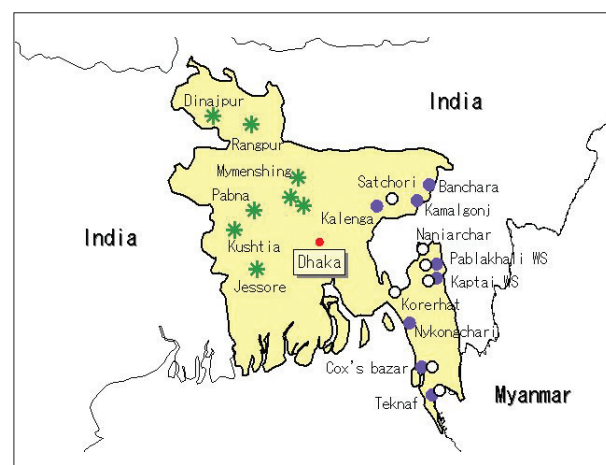


Fig.4.1: Distribution of Asiatic Black bear and Malayan sun bear in Bangladesh.

*: Extinct, ●: Asiatic black bear, ○: Sun bear

Giesen et al. 2001; Daily News 2006). Sun bears were reported from sat-chari forests of Kulaura in the Moulavibazar district near the Indian border (Giesen et al. 2001). A female sun bear and her offspring were seen in the wild by local people at Korerhat of Mirsarai Forest range in the Chittagong district in 1996, and a lactating female with 2 cubs was observed in Jorachari, Upazilla, and Rangamati. The cubs were caught and released in the Dulahazara Safari Park in 2006 (Daily News 2006).

Sloth bears: Sloth bears are called bhalluk/khala harin by Maghs, Chakmas, and Garos. This species is recognized to be rare, and is designated in Schedule 3 by the Bangladesh Preservation Act of 1974, and critically endangered nationally (IUCN 2000). At the beginning of 19th century, sloth bears were rare in Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet, but perhaps more common in the Madhupur Gar and the Garo hills of the Greater Mymensingh Mymensingh district (Husain 1974; Rizvi 1975; Khan 1982; Sarker and Sarker 1984, 1988; Haque 1986; Sarker et al. 1995-96).

Population threats

Black, sun, and sloth bears in Bangladesh all face threats of shooting, trapping, and capturing by poachers for their flesh and skins, and selling to zoos, circus parties and bear charmers. Bear meat is considered to be delicious food used in wedding and religious festivals by local tribal people (e.g. Maghs, Chakmas, Garos). There are no reports of bear farming in Bangladesh.

Habitat threats

Habitats of the three bear species include a variety of forests, such as mixed moist deciduous forests, tropical moist semi-deciduous forest, and tropical semi-ever green forests in the hilly regions. No details are known about habitat differences among the three species. Official statistics claim that protected forest areas constitute about 8% of the total land area of the country but actually it is less than 5%.

Habitat destruction, deforestation, human settlement, urbanization, industry and agricultural expansion are threats to bears (Sarker 1992). Reserve forests are disappearing rapidly due to illegal exploitation, encroachment, and annual burning, both in protected and non-protected areas (Sarker and Sarker 1984). Impoverished local people collect firewood in bear habitat every day for their livelihood. Large quantities of bamboo are also extracted from bamboo forests year after year for household materials, although bamboo clusters and young bamboo provide shelter and food for bears. Poverty and illiteracy are also the background of forest over-exploitation.

Conflicts with humans

Bears move into village orchards in search of fruits (e.g. pumpkins, pineapple, cucumber). They also feed on carrion, and kill livestock such as sheep, goats, and ponies (Jerdon 1867; Blandfort 1888; Pocock 1939-40). Bear attacks on humans (including deaths) have been reported during fruiting season (Blandfort 1888). Local people reported that bears sometimes raid pineapple, banana, guava, leechi, and mango orchards in summer (May to July), as well as tea garden areas of Kamolganj Upazilla in Moulavibazar district.

Most years during June-July, a number of black bears enter tea gardens within Bangladesh by crossing the Indian border, causing injuries to tea garden laborers. Most such incidents happen when a wounded animal or a female bear with cubs encounters humans. At present such incidents are rare, due to the establishment of a wire net by the Indian Government along the Bangladesh boundary which prevents bears from crossing. No compensation is given to victims of a bear mauling. The government has recently initiated a compensation program, but it is limited to incidents caused by elephants (*Elaphas maximus*) in hilly forests and tigers (*Panthera tigris*) in the Sundarbans.

Present management

Government system

The Wildlife Preservation Act/Order was passed in 1973 and amended in 1974. Under this Act, in 1981 the government imposed a ban on hunting, shooting, killing, trapping and exporting any wildlife species including bears, but the ban is not properly applied by authorities. The forest department has initiated some conservation projects but little action has been taken during post-project periods, and the law enforcement agency has been ineffective in the field (Sarker 1986, 1992). Protected areas in Bangladesh have not been properly managed for conservation of wildlife, including bears. Although the Government of Bangladesh imposed a ban on felling of forest trees in 1981, in practice, timber harvest continues, both officially and illegally. Neither the Forest Department nor the Environment Department has sufficient, trained manpower or tools in the field. Persons who have killed bears and other animals are not always prosecuted.

The Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) completed a project entitled "Survey of Fauna" during 1995-96 of which I was the team leader. The authority develops conservation and management plans for conservation of wildlife that will include bears (Sarker et al. 1995-1996). A few initiatives have also been taken

for establishment of eco-tourism in some areas.

Cooperation between the government and NGOs is also important. Recently only a single NGO, NISARGA, has taken the initiative for protected areas and biodiversity conservation in Bangladesh. NISARGA has published some articles in daily newspapers regarding protected areas and biodiversity. Other NGOs have made some contributions to environmental protection, such as reforestation, environmental education, and other programs, but without any follow up.

Public education

Very few programs have thus far been initiated by the government (e.g. Department of Forest, Department of Environment). Some local and international NGOs have tried to initiate awareness programs regarding wildlife, but they need additional international financial cooperation.

There are wildlife curricula at Honors and Master classes at the Dhaka, Jahangirnagar and Chittagong Universities.

Recommended actions

- (1) Detailed field survey and long term research and monitoring of bears.
- (2) Ecosystem assessment of bear habitat for determining hot spots of bears and other wild species for declaration as protected areas.
- (3) Development and implementation of conservation and management strategies and action plans.
- (4) International economic and technical support, along with national experts from universities and research organizations.
- (5) Protection of bears and other wildlife from poaching, using trained patrol guards with modern equipment, as well as improving the law enforcement agency.
- (6) Scientific management and improvement of habitat by the employment of trained personnel.
- (7) Use of indigenous knowledge and involvement of local tribal people.
- (8) Planting of native trees for the food and cover needed by bears.
- (9) Promotion of awareness and education on bears.
- (10) Arranging training, workshops, video shows, drawing exhibitions, meetings, and seminars.
- (11) Poverty reduction of local communities by creating employment in nurseries, forest planting, poultry, garment, and similar small-scale enterprises.

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