

How to control poaching and trade of Nepal's bears ?

Summary

Poaching and illegal trade of bear parts are prevalent across Nepal, driven by demand for traditional medicines and other uses. We explored the prospects of bear trade in Central Nepal using semi-structured interviews with enforcement officers (n=32), bear researchers (n=12), traders (n=6), and traditional medicine practitioners (n=3) through purposive sampling. We also reviewed bear seizure data (2000 to 2023) obtained from the Division Forest Office, media reviews, and records of the Nepal Police. We found that the incidents of bear killing are much higher than the reported cases as many bears killed in retaliation remain unrecorded. Disregarding poaching, illegal trade, and human-bear conflicts can be costly for conserving small and isolated bear populations and associated species that share the habitat.

Introduction

Of the eight species of bears recorded globally, Nepal hosts three species of bear: Asiatic Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), Tibetan Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos pruinosus*), and Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*). Bear gallbladder (Photo 1) use is linked to different traditions - to treat several diseases by the Shoka tribe in India [1]; gallstones, liver problems, fever, heart diseases, and eye irritation in Traditional Chinese Medicine [2], and Ayurveda and Tibetan medicinal traditions. This traditional belief is likely fueling the poaching of bears in Nepal, which lies in between the world's two big consumers of traditional medicine, India and China.



Photo 1: Photo of a bear gall bladders (our online review photo)

This brief is developed as a summary of our research. It highlights the current status of bear poaching, and trade and underscores the urgent need for conservation efforts and research to protect Nepal's bears targeting policymakers and researchers.

Nepal's bears under threat of illegal poaching and trade

Bears in Nepal are threatened due to poaching and increasing changes in their habitat (habitat destruction, direct harm due to human-bear conflicts). We identified the following key threats:

Nepal's laws do not allow hunting, farming, and trading of bears or their parts and products. They are strictly protected by the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act (1973) and the CITES Act 2019. We found cases of poaching in the areas close to bear habitats; sadly, referred to often as "seen" or "heard" by many but not much documented beyond some cases of seizures. Bear parts, particularly bile, are linked to their usage in traditional medicines, and bushmeat consumed, and the rest of the parts are also used as taboos, fuelling their poaching.

[1]: Jabin, G., Singh, S.K., Ghosh, A., Basu, S., Chandra, K., Thakur, M. (2019). Illegal trade of obscured bear parts: a case study of identifying the suspected bear gall bladders. Forensic Science International: Reports, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsir.2019.100001>.

[2]: Fobar R, 2019. Bear bile, explained. National Geographic, accessed 9 Feb 2023.. URL: <https://on.natgeo.com/3Z8s32t>.

Although legal instruments related to the management of protected areas and forests in Nepal have restricted the killing of wildlife, many communities living near these forests practiced hunting as a tradition and as the only source of protein. Such practice is still prevalent in many areas where wild animals like deer and partridges are sought after for wild meat. Bears are often perceived as threats by these hunters to continue their illegal activities in the forest and additional resources they can capitalize on. Bears are killed in such encounters to reap the potential benefits by selling their bile or consuming their parts locally.

Increasing human pressure on forested land for agriculture, settlements, and infrastructure development has increased the proximity of humans and bears. This has escalated human-bear encounters, particularly along the forest edges, roads, and transmission lines. Human casualties are the dominant cost of such conflicts. We found cases of rampant retaliatory killings of bears following the conflict.

Poaching and illegal trade of bears

Although farming bears for bile is legal in some countries and synthetic alternatives are also available, consumer demand for wild bile is still high [3], fueling bear poaching and illegal trade in the wild. Bear, primarily the Asiatic black bears, are farmed for their bile, mostly in East and Southeast Asian countries like China, where farming is legal, and in Vietnam, and Laos, where it is illegal [4]. Demand for bear parts in the illegal market increases threats to bears from poaching and opportunistic hunting.

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Poaching and illegal trade are rampant, yet under-recognized conservation challenges in Nepal, in particular for bears. At least 72 bear gall bladders were seized in 2000-2023, involving several other parts (paws, claws, teeth, skin). Moreover, our interviews with traders and enforcement officials revealed that the bear parts were lost even if the poachers were caught. In many cases, there were also instances of fake bile seizures. Two bears on average would be killed yearly in villages near bear habitats, targeting festive seasons for money. Bear trade is also identified as a key wildlife trade issue, with 44 pieces of bladder and 41 pieces of bones seized in 2011 and 2015 [5].

Why are bears poached & traded?

Bears are killed for various reasons, such as for different traditional medicine, taboos, and recreational as well as opportunistic hunting. Some of the reported parts used include:

- Bile: exported for medicinal purposes, as a cold medicine attributive to liver, gallbladder, and heart disease. There is a taboo that if there is a stone in the gallbladder, it creates good fortunes, so they fetch more money.
- Skin, pelt, or hide: extracted for export, and used as a decorative item. The leftover skin along with fur (after meat consumption) is used locally under a baby's bed to prevent clothes from getting wet due to urine or used as a blanket in extreme cold weather.
- Meat: Consumed as bushmeat, with some traditional beliefs that it also cures ailments. Bear fat is also consumed.
- Paws and claws: soaked in wines to prepare delicacies and soups
- Penis: bone used by local shamans as remedies in traditional medicines (e.g. in West Chitwan, Tharu community)
- Bones and teeth: Used as a taboo for religious purposes and to prepare souvenirs

[3]: Crudge, B., Nguyen, T., & Cao, T. T. (2020). The challenges and conservation implications of bear bile farming in Viet Nam. *Oryx*, 54(2), 252–259.

[4]: Free The Bears, 2024. Bear bile farming - 2024 status. Accessed August 2024. URL: <https://freethebears.org/blogs/news/bear-bile-farming-2024-status>.

[5]: Paudel, P.K., Acharya, K.P., Baral, H.S., Heinen, J.T. & Jnawali, S.R. (2020) Trends, patterns, and networks of illicit wildlife trade in Nepal: A national synthesis. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 2, 1–11.

A case study of a bear trade incident

Evidence shows that retaliatory killing may occur following human-bear conflicts. In late 2023, a dead bear was found stored on the rooftop of a house in a village in West Nepal. The bear was freshly killed; meat and blood were consumed while bile was taken out, and the rest of the part was stored as temporary taxidermy filled with straw (Photo 2). We recorded many similar incidents. Sometimes, the killed bear would be hung in front of their house. In other places, bears would be killed by torture such as stoning, beating with sticks, or locking them in a shed and burning it, demonstrating how bears are punished for raiding their crops or attacking livestock.

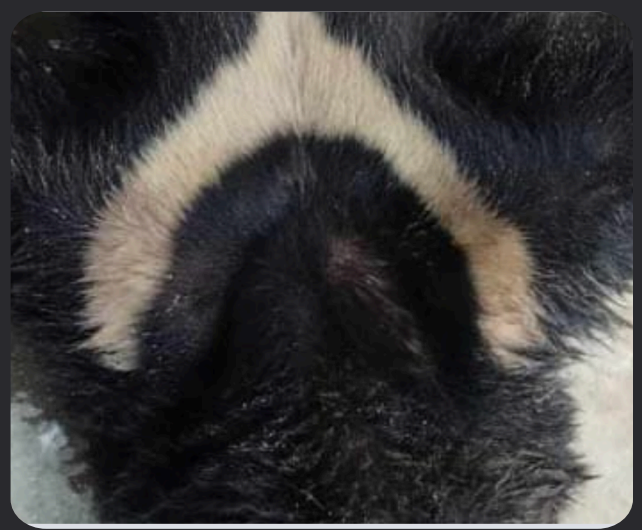


Photo 2- bear parts found stored in a house

Addressing bear bile trade is urgent but there is limited enforcement capacity

All three bear species are listed under the CITES appendices, protected under the IUCN Red List, and national legislation. In Nepal, bear conservation and trade monitoring activities within protected areas i.e. national parks, hunting reserves, and conservation areas are under the jurisdiction of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) via NPWC Act 1973 while those outside of protected areas are managed by the Division Forest Offices. However, effective law enforcement is limited by a lack of resources, staff, and skills to address conflict and poaching, and difficulties in monitoring due to trade in inaccessible locations. There are also issues of misidentifying seized bile products due to the difficulty in identifying fake products. There is a huge gap in the forest and protected area staff's capacity to monitor and conserve bears and their habitats as the management priority is focused on timber production or conservation of charismatic fauna. In addition, the lack of bear-specific strategies and enforcement plans hinders bear conservation efforts in Nepal. Nevertheless, enforcement officials are key in protecting Nepal's bears from illegal trade and have specific roles (Figure 1).

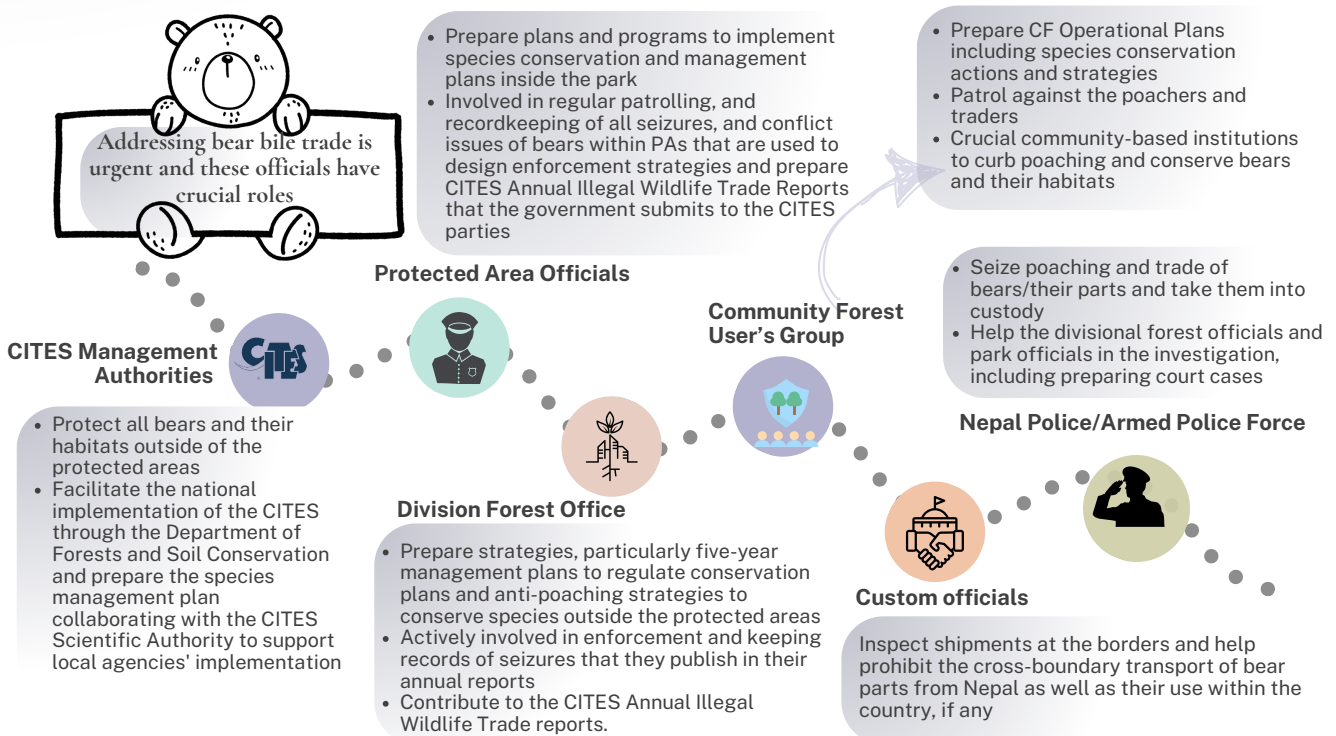


Figure 1: Infographic showing the role of key enforcement officials in protecting Nepal's bear

Securing the future

Enlisting bears under the Endangered categories the IUCN Red List and the CITES Appendix supports the conservation and regulation of international law, but it is not enough. Documented seizures, interview responses, and cases show that more efforts are required. There is a need to shift conservation attention to other non-charismatic species like bears and facilitate their research and conservation initiatives. Additionally, it is crucial to improve enforcement targeting Nepal's bears - including environmental laws to protect these species and their habitat. This requires increased awareness and collaborative approaches to conservation, including addressing human-bear conflicts and regular patrolling.

Here are key strategies officials and conservation agencies can do to address this issue:

Increase awareness among enforcement officials on the conservation importance and legal status of bears. There is extreme hunting pressure affecting bear populations due to the killing of bear cubs and mothers. There is a particular time of the year and situations when poaching and trade linked to retaliatory killings occur i.e. during breeding times, growth of certain plants like Himalayan bamboo that can be avoided through increased awareness. The enforcement authorities can regularly organize (and/or facilitate) awareness-focused training/programs.

Develop a strategy to increase patrolling and control poaching and illegal trade. It is crucial to identify bear-human conflict and trade hotspots to implement enforcement. Regular bear poachers should be discouraged through strategic patrolling and strong punishments. The enforcement officials can plan targeted patrolling activities using innovative approaches (e.g. tools, communities). Further, the management can also facilitate the National Bear Conservation Action Plan.

Document and report the bear seizures. When bears are seized, they must be accurately identified and reported. Importantly, there were many "to be verified" cases due to a lack of capacity to distinguish fake vs real biles. There was evidence of bear trade incidents as observed during the interviews, that signals the seizure cases are an underestimate of the real poaching and trade incidents. Further, we observed the non-reporting of Illegal Wildlife Trade reports from the CITES from Nepal. Division forest and park authorities should properly document and report all bear poaching and trade incidents with priority.

Engage bear scientists and trade specialists to refer to conservation action plans within the country and across borders through a holistic approach. Increase transboundary efforts to address regional issues of the wildlife trade. Government officials, especially Divisional Forest Officials should involve bear scientists and trade specialists in designing bear conservation and patrolling plans.

Identify bear habitat and safeguard. Habitats (food, cover, and space) should be managed for bears to ensure connectivity among populations and long-term survival. Government officials should collaborate with local community groups (e.g. community forest user groups, women's groups, buffer zone management units) to plan and implement habitat management activities.

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