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Twenty-seven missing bear cubs in Ha Tay province: Did FPD rangers act irresponsibly?

The recent disappearance of twenty-seven bear cubs (weighing from 15 to 25kg) is thought to have directly resulted from irresponsible actions on the part of the Forest Protection Department Task Force, the Ha Tay Forest Protection Department, and the Dan Phuong Forest Protection Sub-Department in Ha Tay province.



Bears at An Canh bear farm in Ha Tay province (Source: Science & Life Newspaper)

On July 31, 2007, the Forest Protection Department (FPD) Task Force reported that there were 20 unchipped bear cubs being kept at An Canh bear farm at km31, Phung Thuong – Phuc Tho commune, Ha Tay province. On August 1, 2007, staff from the FPD Task Force, working in cooperation with Ha Tay FPD and Dan Phuong Forest Protection Sub-Department, carried out an investigation of An Canh bear farm and discovered twenty-seven captive bear cubs weighing between 15 and 25kg. This information was compiled into a preliminary report, and authorities then instructed the farm owner to keep the bear cubs pending further investigation. However, all of the bear cubs later disappeared.

In an interview with a Science & Life reporter on September 10, 2007, Mr Nguyen Phi Truyen, Head of the FPD Task Force, said that one staff member from the FPD Task Force had come to the area after receiving information about the case, and in corporation with the local FPD, had investigated the farm.

The farm owner allegedly made things very difficult for investigators, meaning the initial investigation took a full day. After compiling a preliminary report, the investigators asked the farm owners to keep all the bear cubs so that they could come back the next day to continue the investigation. However, when the investigation team returned the next day, all the bear cubs had been dispersed and hidden. The farm owner then stated that the twenty-seven bear cubs in fact belonged to a neighboring farm; they had asked the An Canh farm to keep the bears for them temporarily and they had simply returned the bears to their original owners.

According to an unofficial source, it is more likely that these bear cubs were smuggled to the farm from outside Vietnam. Captive bears in cages are generally not able to breed; indeed, the number of captive bears in Vietnam that are able to breed can be counted on one hand. Moreover, according to Decision 47/2006 released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, farm owners don't automatically get ownership rights to bears that are successfully bred in captivity. Instead, it is highly likely that these bears were smuggled into Vietnam from Laos, as part of a wildlife trade ring.

According to a database on which records of electronically chipped bears are kept, the number of chipped bears registered to the two farms neighboring An Canh is equal to the number of bears which were discovered in a subsequent investigation. However, the weights of the bears are different.. According to the database, bears in the two neighboring bear farms were last chipped in October 2005, at which time the lightest bear on the farm was 90kg. However, the missing bear cubs weighed between 15 and 25kg. As such, it is impossible that the bear cubs discovered in the An Canh investigation were those electronically chipped a few years previously, and registered to the neighboring farms.

The authorities should have had both the professional competence and equipment necessary to undertake the investigation. Had this been the case, it would have been impossible to 'lose;' the bear cubs. However, according to wildlife protection organizations, there were problems with the manner in which the authorities dealt with the case. As such, the authorities are not only in charge of finding out who is responsible for removing the bear cubs, but also finding out where the bear cubs are now.

Nguyen Thuy

Translated by Luu Thi Ngoc Anh, edited by Laura Whitford dated September 11, 2007

Please note: Translated by Education for Nature – Vietnam. This translation is unofficial in nature. The Vietnamese language version of this story can be obtained by contacting ENV