

Bear bile tourism thrives despite exposés

Influential people might be supporting illegal industry, says a prominent lawmaker

By AN DIEN

On the last leg of a five-day trip, a group of Korean tourists stopped in at a bear farm in the northern province of Quang Ninh.

After several minutes of observing the bile harvesting process and haggling over the prices, the matter was settled.

A Korean tourist agreed to pay US\$500 for less than 20cc of bear bile that he planned to take home. The moon bear, anaesthetized and taken out of a cage, was still lying unconscious after having its bile extracted.

Video footage filmed by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) last October has sparked indignation among conservation groups and parliamentarians.

This week, Vietnam's first environmental group Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV) added Vietnamese subtitles to the KBS film and distributed it to Vietnamese senior lawmakers and relevant ministries.

"This is not a one-time occurrence," said Nguyen Dinh Xuan, a lawmaker who has been campaigning against the bear bile industry in Vietnam. "I have repeatedly urged agencies concerned to take more drastic measures only to find that very



A bear lies unconscious at a bear farm in Ha Long Town in Quang Ninh Province, as a man extracts bear bile from the animal

PHOTO COURTESY OF EDUCATION FOR NATURE-VIETNAM

little headway has been made," Xuan said.

"We need to ask a serious question: Is it that Vietnam is not well-equipped to tackle the bear bile industry or that it doesn't want to put an end to it?"

Xuan is not the only politician angry about the industry's continued existence.

Le Van Cuong said all 33 members of the Committee for Science, Technology, and Environment of the National Assembly have protested the farming and trade of bear bile and are working to abolish it.

They would continue to push for tougher action after watching the KBS news segment this week, Cuong said.

Around 3,500 bears are being farmed in Vietnam, concentrated mostly in the North.

"It's a shame for Vietnam that this illegal activity continues right next to the beautiful Ha Long Bay," Cuong said. "I just don't understand why our proposals have kept falling on deaf ears."

Lucrative business

A recent EVN survey of around

3,000 people in three major Vietnamese cities found 22 percent have used bear bile in the past. Thirteen percent of the respondents admitted they had tried it over the last two years. The belief is strong in Vietnam that bear bile helps cure a slew of health problems including arthritis, rheumatism, muscle complaints, bruises, digestive problems and even cancer.

In October 2009, Quang Ninh Province environmental police raided Viet Thai, one of the six known bear bile farms in the province, and arrested nine

people, including two South Koreans, engaged in the extraction and sale of bear bile.

But all the company had to do was pay an administrative fine.

"We were saddened by such [lenient] punishment but many legal loopholes have thwarted efforts to press criminal charges against the firm," Senior Lieutenant-Colonel Vu Dinh Phu, head of the Quang Ninh's environmental police force told *Thanh Nien Weekly*.

Article 90 of the Penal Code stipulates that those found transporting organs of endangered species could face prosecution. But it is not clear if extracted bear bile is considered an organ of the bear, Phu said.

"We want to go further, but might as well give up [given the legal hurdles]," he said.

Lawmaker Xuan disagreed. "The laws are made to protect the wildlife animals, not the other way around. The only issue here is how we interpret the laws and apply them properly."

"At the end of the day, I think this is all about money. The bear bile industry is a lucrative business that brings in huge benefits for many people involved," Xuan said.

"I don't rule out the possibility that some people in high places have provided shelter for this activity."

After the October raid, the farms in Quang Ninh have been "extremely cautious", and hired local people to look out for surveillance activities by conservation groups, said Tuan Bendixsen, Vietnam director of Animals Asia Foundation (AAF).

According to AAF data, a bear farm may see about 80 plus visitors per day, most of which are Korean. On average there are four to five visits to the bear farm per day each lasting anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour.

"From our other sources we know on average how much bile they sell per month and from the prices that they charge, between \$3 and \$6 per militer. I can tell you that it's very profitable," Bendixsen said.

UN reports vast inequalities in urban Vietnamese populations

(TN-HCMC) Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are facing challenges in ensuring equitable and sustainable development, according to a survey released on Wednesday by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

"I would like to highlight one of the key characteristics of the urban poverty survey which we believes is particularly important, and that is the multi-dimensional approach it uses to assess poverty," said Setsuko Yamazaki, UNDP country director in Vietnam, at the launch of the findings.

"This approach recognizes that poverty is not simply an issue of

lack of income. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional problem for those who are deprived across a range of different domains such as health, education and access to clean water and sanitation."

The report states that 38 percent of people in Hanoi and 54 percent of those living in Ho Chi Minh City have no access to the social security system. Similarly, more than a third of people in both cities lack access to proper housing services such as tap water, waste disposal and sewage drains.

In education, 27 percent of people aged 18 and older in HCMC have not completed lower-

secondary education, or (if they are school aged) are not enrolled in school.

The report found that a high proportion of urban migrants make up the populations of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The number is only increasing.

About 72 percent of migrants in the two urban hubs are between 15-39 years-old. Fifteen percent of them have had to move to new accommodations at least twice, over the past year, due to changes in their job or the emergence of cheaper housing opportunities.

The average monthly income of Hanoians was determined to be

VND2.32 million (US\$119), while Saigon residents were said to make an average of VND2.44 million (\$125). Those with permanent residency status earned around 16 percent more than others, the report found.

"Some of the priority areas highlighted in the report include strengthening the social security system, improving housing services (and housing quality) and making sure migrants are more included in social organizations and community activities," Yamazaki said. "Above all, it means ensuring equality among the people living in the two cities."



PHOTO BY NGHIA PHAM

A street vendor sleeps on a sidewalk on Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street in HCMC's District 3