

The Bear in the Bottle

Unclear laws and consumer demands make it a dangerous life for endangered animals in Vietnam. From bears to monkeys, mouse deer and monitor lizards, all are at risk. But there are some people doing what they can to save them. Words by Brian Webb.

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT VIETNAM IS A growing economy. The middle class, almost non-existent in the past, is rising. But with the rise of the purchasing power of the Vietnamese, and the taste for luxury that comes along with it, there has been an unfortunate rise in the illegal wildlife trade. There is a growing demand for meat and other products from species that once thrived in the mountains and jungles of Vietnam. One of many problems that has been receiving a lot of attention from NGOs, as well as the media, is the extraction of bile from bears.

Bear bile has been used for thousands of years in China and Vietnam for its supposed healing properties. The Asiatic black bear is indigenous to this country, but now, just like the tigers and elephants, their numbers in the wild are being decimated. This is partly due to the hunting and trapping associated with bear farms, places that keep bears in tiny cages and periodically harvest their bile. As you can imagine, these are cruel places to live in for the animals.

According to Van Anh, co-director of Education for Nature Vietnam (ENV), laws concerning such affairs are a bit fuzzy.

"It is legal to keep bears, but not to harvest their bile," he explains.

◦ A Wildlife Crime Unit

One can imagine where enforcement becomes

difficult. ENV has been working hard to counter the illegal wildlife trade. As the name suggests, a large part of what they do involves education. Many people are unaware of the laws concerning different species, and another problem is that even when people have witnessed an offence, they don't know how or where to report it.

ENV's response was to set up a hotline to report these kinds of crimes. At first, they expected that most calls would come from tourists. "We thought that Vietnamese people might not care," says Anh.

But it was a big surprise when, "out of 1,850 cases, Vietnamese people reported 99 percent of them." When a crime is reported to the hotline, they send their Wildlife Crimes Unit, all of whom are volunteers, to investigate.

◦ In Search of a Bear

Hang, a volunteer, took me around with her to check out some places around Hanoi that were reported to be selling products of species from the restricted list. The first place we stopped into was a wine shop on the



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Caged Up

(This page) One of ENV's goals is to prevent the illegal wildlife trade for animals. (Opposite page) Bears are kept in bottles to flavour rice wine.

outskirts of the city. They were wary from the start, wondering why a western man was in the shop in the first place. Apparently this place had been reported before, and they were not willing to show us everything they had. But a big sign in the front of the place advertised organised trips to a bear bile farm 30 kilometres outside of the capital.

There wasn't much to be done here.

The next stop was a restaurant where someone had reported that monitor lizard meat was for sale. Two dozen sparrows awaited their fate in a cage near the front; not pretty, but then again, sparrows aren't endangered. Here, the staff were a bit more friendly and even served us tea. But we came at the wrong time. There had been a party earlier in the day, so, consequently they were sold out of monitor meat. The waitress did tell us that the lizards are usually kept live on the premises.

The last restaurant we stopped by was more fruitful, however. In order to avert suspicion, we pretended to be an engaged couple planning a wedding party. They didn't suspect a thing. All they saw was potential profit, and were happy to show us around. And sure enough, after a few questions about prices and the capacity of the restaurant, we saw what we'd come

“After a few questions about prices and the capacity of the restaurant, we saw what we'd come looking for; a large glass jar filled with *ruou* (wine) and immersed inside was a baby bear.”

looking for. A large glass jar filled with *ruou* (wine), a baby bear immersed inside. Other jars of rice wine had multiple bear paws.

It wouldn't be too shocking to see for anyone who's been living here for more than a few months. But that, in itself, is one of the problems. After seeing this, I realised that I've probably seen similar examples in the past and have not done anything about it, and wasn't even aware that I should have.

○ A Surprising Answer

As we drove back, I asked Hang what would be done about the restaurant. I was quite surprised by her answer.

“Well it depends on the seriousness of the

incident. But usually the first time we just call them,” she says. Some of the violators don't know that what they are doing is illegal. Some of them comply after a phone call.

The ones who don't? “Then we notify the authorities,” she continues.

But often the authorities either can't or won't take decisive action. As we pull closer to the ENV offices, Hang laughs as she tells me about something the restaurant manager had said to her: “Last time somebody came here to plan a party. We set everything up, but nobody showed – only some officials who told us that we were selling illegal things.”

Apparently they hadn't confiscated those illegal things. So, as it turned out, the bear in the bottle wasn't their first violation. We can only hope it will be their last.

For more information please visit www.envietnam.org or if you would like to report a crime call their toll-free hotline number at 1800 1522. 