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## Ha Long Bear tourism briefing

Over the past two years, bear tourism in Ha Long City of Quang Ninh province has attracted a lot of publicity. Working independently and also in cooperation with Environmental Police, ENV has uncovered the secret world of Korean bear tourism in Ha Long City.

Awareness of the issue started in late July 2007, when 27 unregistered bear cubs were discovered at a bear farm in Ha Tay province (now a part of Hanoi). The cubs were illegally owned under the regulations of Decision No. 02/2005/QĐ-BNN on captive bear management by MARD, dated January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005. After the implementation of this law, all of the estimated 4,000 wild bears in captivity in Vietnam were registered and tagged with a small microchip to uniquely identify each one. According the Decision, after the registration cut-off date of February 28, 2005, any unregistered bear found at a farm or being traded would be declared illegal, confiscated by authorities, and the owner prosecuted.

However, initial efforts to inspect the farm in Ha Tay did little more than alert the bear farmers to the suspicions of the functional authorities, and when they finally returned to the farm fully prepared to take action, the bear cubs had disappeared.

A subsequent investigation led police to Quang Ninh province where they discovered an additional 80 unregistered bears at six farms operating for Asian tourists in Ha Long City.

Subsequent surveys have confirmed that there are six major bear tourism operations housing approximately 300 captive bears for foreign tourists, mainly Koreans. These bears are registered with the government, but any form of exploitation for commercial purposes is illegal.



*Illegal bear cubs discovered at a farm in Ha Tay which later disappeared*

*Photo: WSPA*

During three surveillance operations outside a number of large bear farms located just a few miles from scenic Ha Long Bay in 2008 and 2009, ENV documented more than 100 tourist buses delivering around 1500 Korean tourists to bear farms, where they witness a bear bile extraction, taste wine, and are encouraged to buy illegal bear products.

Link: Bear tourism at Ha Long City: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG\\_VEPyeZPE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG_VEPyeZPE)

ENV conducted interviews with Korean tourists which indicated that the bear products purchased at the farms are usually taken back to Korea in violation of the Convention on the Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). Under this international agreement, all bear species are listed as Appendix I species meaning that the international trade of bears or bear products without import and export permits is prohibited. Out of 13 tourists interviewed, all had visited a bear farm during their visit to Ha Long Bay and five had purchased products such as bear paw, wine, and bile, spending between \$20-300 USD. The sample size

was small because tour operators actively prevented undercover investigators from completing the survey intended to target more than 100 tourists.

On May 30, 2009, ENV organized and accompanied Mr. Nguyen Dinh Xuan, a member of the National Assembly and also a member of the Science, Technology and Environment Committee of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Environmental Police and National TV officers on an inspection of some of the bear farms in Ha Long City. The inspection team observed and confirmed evidence of the illegal bear bile and bear product trade targeting tourists, particularly Koreans. Footage of the inspections is available at the following links:



*National Assembly member Mr. Xuan inspected a bear farm in Ha Long City  
Photo: ENV*

Bear bile tourism operation at Ha Long City (Part 1): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s45tk8OspjU>

Bear bile tourism operation at Ha Long City (Part 2): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ181-6i5bo>

A documentary film of the incident was broadcast on National TV and a series of articles written by Xuan and other journalists on the issue were published in major newspapers. As a result, on October 2, 2009, the Quang Ninh Environmental Police raided a bear farm in Ha Long City and caught subjects in the act of illegally extracting and selling bear bile to a group of Korean tourists. Police arrested nine people, two Koreans and seven Vietnamese, involved in illegal activities at the farm. They also confiscated hundreds of samples of what was believed to be bear bile as well as equipment used to extract bile. The bear farm is owned by the Viet Thai Company Ltd, which keeps 82 bears in captivity. Twenty-four of these bears had been established as illegal by authorities in September 2007. Legal proceedings are yet to begin against the bear farm.

Despite the raid, ENV surveillance in November 2009 and March 2010 still recorded tour buses taking tourists into bear farms and openly challenging the law. ENV has also received complaints from Korean tourists about being misled and taken to bear farms in Ha Long City.

ENV and other concerned conservation organizations are requesting the authorities take swift and firm action to deal with the problem. It is necessary to confiscate illegal bears and apply the toughest penalties to end illegal bear tourism. Now is the time to ensure the strength of the law and not allow the reputation of Vietnam's premier tourist site at Ha Long Bay to be overshadowed by the illegal activities of a few greedy businessmen in Quang Ninh.