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Letter to the Editor

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Use of bear bile in COVID-19 treatment should be stopped

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is gravely concerned to learn that the National Health Commission of China has recommended the use of bear bile in the treatment of severe and critical cases of COVID-19.

This move is a blow to conservationists worldwide, as on Feb 24th this year, China declared an immediate and comprehensive ban on the trade in wildlife and the sale of wild animals for food, citing the risk of diseases spreading from animals to humans, following the emergence of the novel coronavirus which has wreaked havoc across the world.

The Chinese National Health Commission, in recommending treatments for the coronavirus that includes bear bile, highlights a contradictory approach to wildlife viz. shutting down the live trade in animals for food on the one hand while promoting the trade and use of animal parts on the other.

Learning from the lessons of COVID-19, it is more crucial than ever to end the use of wildlife parts in medicine, particularly from species that are endangered and threatened such as bears.

It is indeed hugely irresponsible to continue promoting medicines containing wildlife parts in an era of unprecedented biodiversity loss, including in illegal and unsustainable trade, especially of endangered and threatened species.

Recent surveys conducted in China showed the vast majority of respondents were opposed to the use of wildlife in medicine. The continued use of wildlife in traditional medicine will only fuel the demand for threatened wildlife.

The promotion of bear bile has the propensity to increase the amount used, affecting not only captive bears but also those in the wild, imperilling an already endangered species in Asia and across the world.

The main target of the bear bile trade – the Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) also known as the moon bear – is today listed as vulnerable by the IUCN Red List. Little is known about its total population, although as few as 25,000 may survive in the wild and it has certainly vanished from much of its former range and is in decline where it persists. The trade has also targeted the sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) – also vulnerable – and various subspecies of brown bear.

Over-hunting, combined with massive habitat loss, has led to the complete destruction of some populations and declines in others.

Even though bear bile is to be sourced from bear farms in China, this will not relieve pressure on wild bear population. Reasons are that breeding of bears is costly, while it costs less and easier to capture bears from the wild to repopulate farms with high turnover. Further, there are consumers who would prefer bear bile from wild animals, either viewing this as being more authentic or due to concerns about the conditions in bear farms.

Now that Beijing has approved the use of bear bile in the treatment of COVID-19, we fear a rise in incidents of poaching. Recent studies conducted have showed that poachers were targeting sun bears, sought after by Chinese medicine practitioners, in Sabah and Sarawak.

Further, the Chinese recommendation and practice are likely to encourage traditional medicine practitioners outside China to follow suit in promoting bear bile as a cure for COVID-19. Desperate consumers may easily be swayed.

A further major concern is the cruelty and torture inside bear farms and bile facilities, that are akin to houses of horror. There are about 20,000 bears being held in tiny cages under cruel conditions across China to cater to the demand from traditional medicine suppliers.

Animal welfare groups report that conditions are indeed horrifying where thousands of moon bears lie in constant pain and anguish in cages no bigger than coffins. They have to endure crude and brutal methods in the extraction of bile from rusting catheters, barbaric full-metal jackets with neck spikes, medicinal pumps and open, infected holes drilled into their bellies. Animal rights activists contend that such conditions cause massive psychological harm to the bears.

Some bears are put into cages as cubs and never released. Most farmed bears are starved, dehydrated and suffer from multiple diseases and malignant tumours that ultimately kill them. If bears live long enough – and life-spans are short here – they can be bile milked for decades. After 10-20 years when bears stop producing enough bile, they are then killed and their body parts sold.

As the world is crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic, the public health and environmental risks of wildlife trade and use are rightly receiving unprecedented attention. There could be no better time to end the use of wildlife parts, especially of threatened and endangered species in medicine.

In doing so, China could show the world its real commitment to becoming a genuine leader in conservation.

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