

Wildlife Conservation Article

For hundreds of years, the allure of exotic animals has always drawn the interest of the rich across the world, on a regular basis importing them across continents to show them off as a way of accenting their wealth to their peers. In recent years, the trade – worth billions of dollars - has begun to zero in on South and South-East Asia, moving hundreds of animals across borders, to support both the private zoos and the vast traditional medicine made possible by their famously lax wildlife protection laws.

A major portion of the traditional medicine trade is bear bile. This trade involves poaching bears out of their natural habitats and confining them to small cages, barely bigger than themselves. They are then milked of the bile produced in their gall bladders periodically. They tend to be kept in this captive state for the entirety of their life, in conditions which stunt their muscular growth. As of 2018, there are an estimated 800 bears in captivity in Vietnam and 150 in Laos on farms with varying levels of legal protection, be it under genuinely official laws, or bending the rules. These figures fall well shy of the numbers recorded in China to the North. Due to the legality of all stages of the practice from farm to the production of the medicine, there's thought to be over 10,000 bears in farms. This is touted as a method to relieve the pressures on the wild population from poaching, however in reality it's because keeping the bears in captivity enables them to extract more bile over time, rather than doing once and once only.



Free the Bears is a charity which is dedicated to supporting animal welfare projects across Asia to help the plight of the continent's bears. The project was registered as a not-for-profit in 1995 by an Australian, and since has grown into one of the largest charities acting on behalf of these bears. They have worked to rehabilitate

bears from a number of different backgrounds, such as India's dancing sloth bears and those which are used for bile in South-East Asia. They employ numerous different strategies to do so, ranging from re-educating those on the frontlines of the trade like the poachers or the traders. In India they provided seed money to the trainers of the bears to give them a new trade. In Laos they work in tandem with the government to free bears from farms, before moving them into their sanctuaries around the city of Luang Prabang in the North of the country, where they use feeding techniques to replicate the aspects of their life in the wild, giving them the appropriate proteins



and fruits to best support their natural diet. In recent weeks they have rescued a pair of moon bear cubs from such a farm. At merely seven months old, the cubs were malnourished, and will require quarantine and specialist care before they can be introduced to enclosures with their own kind. This rescue in particular brings their rescue total to 19 in Laos so far in 2019, a record which they plan to build on over the remaining months of the year.



In the summer of 2019, Presdales School sent two teams of year 11's and 12's to Vietnam and Laos as part of the World Challenge Scheme. As part of the project stage of the trip, both teams spent five days working at the Luang Prabang site of Free the Bears. The site holds well over 20 bears of both Sun and Moon bears – the two different Laotian species – along with several types of Macaques, three red pandas and several different animals. Whilst working here, we spent time feeding and cleaning the bear and red panda enclosures and feeding the

macaques and baboons. More importantly, we spent time building a wall as part of an otter enclosure which they are building to accommodate for an otter population which they anticipate rescuing due to the increasing popularity of otter bars in Japan. As well as this, we helped erect a portion of a perimeter fence, for security from any locals. This is of paramount importance to the site, as merely weeks before we arrived, the CEO of the organisation told us the story of a pair of cubs who were stolen within days of their rescue.



Free the Bears massively positive to conserving the wildlife of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and has an increasingly positive impact on the local communities as it helps build on the skills of local people. They help contribute to efforts to improve the welfare of as many different animals as possible by providing safe facilities for other rescued and endangered wildlife. The issues which Free the Bears deal with are something which should be of concern to everyone when considering the damages which human life has to global biodiversity. It's an organisation which is worth supporting as it not only supports a wildlife population in one country but for huge swathes of a continent, along with people who use these industries to support themselves. Donations go towards projects which they run in a number of different sites across Asia, and can be made either directly to the charity or through their merchandise Their website can be reached at <https://freethebears.org>.

Research compiled by and article written by World Challenge 2019 Team One

