

The Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre

How did the BSBCC start?

The Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC) was founded by Wong Siew Te in 2008. Wong is one of the few wildlife biologists studying and working with Bornean sun bears.

As a pioneer in sun bear ecology, Wong's field studies in the Bornean rainforest have brought him to some of most challenging and threatened habitats on Earth. Seeing many sun bears in unhealthy captive situations inspired Wong to set up BSBCC.

The BSBCC was established with help from the Sabah Wildlife Department, Sabah Forestry Department, and Land Empowerment Animals People (LEAP).

In 2008, the Centre took over the care of 7 rescued sun bears at the Sabah Wildlife Department facility in Sepilok. In 2013, the Centre operated with 28 sun bears. Sun bears continue to be kept in poor conditions throughout Sabah.

We hope to bring these bears to the safety of the BSBCC and work towards our mission of conservation, education, research, and rehabilitation of sun bears. In early 2015, the numbers of rescued sun bears at BSBCC had increased to 37 bears.



Wong Siew Te, CEO & Founder of BSBCC, working on rehabilitation with a young sun bear.



What do we do here?

Conservation

- Bornean sun bears are only found in Borneo and are threatened with extinction. It is our mission to share the wonders of sun bears with the world so that we can protect them as a species.
- The umbrella of conservation covers animal welfare, rehabilitation, education, and research.



Setting up camera traps in the forest to photograph wild sun bears.



A sun bear going into the forest for the first time.

Welfare

- Rescuing sun bears from terrible captive situations
- Providing proper care for sun bears



Orphaned sun bear cubs need to learn about the forest.



Environmental education activities to promote sun bear awareness.

Rehabilitation

- Encouraging natural bear behavior
- Reintroducing sun bears to the forest environment

Education

- Educating the public by raising awareness about sun bears and their habitat
- Promoting conservation-oriented ecotourism in Sabah

Research

- Facilitating further research about sun bears



Anatomy of a Bornean Sun Bear

Every sun bear has a completely unique chest mark! There are no two sun bears that share the same chest mark pattern.



Sun bears have large, sickle-shaped claws that enable them to grip onto trees. These claws are also important tools for digging and ripping apart decayed wood to reach termites, ants and beetle grubs.



Sun bear paws are very soft, just like the palms of our hands. This helps them walk quietly on the forest ground.

Height:	120 - 150cm
Weight:	30 - 60kg (males) and 20 - 40kg (females)
Tail length:	5cm
Fur:	short, sleek, dark brown or black
Chest mark:	cream to orange with spots
Muzzle color:	grey to orange
Ears:	small and round
Tongue:	20-25cm long
Paws:	pink and hairless
Claws:	sickle-shaped (curved)
Legs:	short and bowed inward

Geography and Habitat

Where can sun bears be found?

Sun bears are found throughout South East Asia in the following countries:

Eastern India, Southern China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatera and Borneo.

Most sun bears are distributed between sea level and 2,700 meters above sea level.

There are 2 subspecies of sun bears:

Malayan sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus malayanus*) are found on the Asian Mainland and in Sumatra.

Bornean sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus euryspilus*) are only found in Borneo.

Bornean sun bears are half the size of Malayan sun bears. Scientists believe this is an evolutionary adaptation to food shortage.

Trees provide food for the sun bears in the forest.



Where do sun bears live?

Sun bears are a forest dependent species. They are found in various forest types across Southeast Asia.

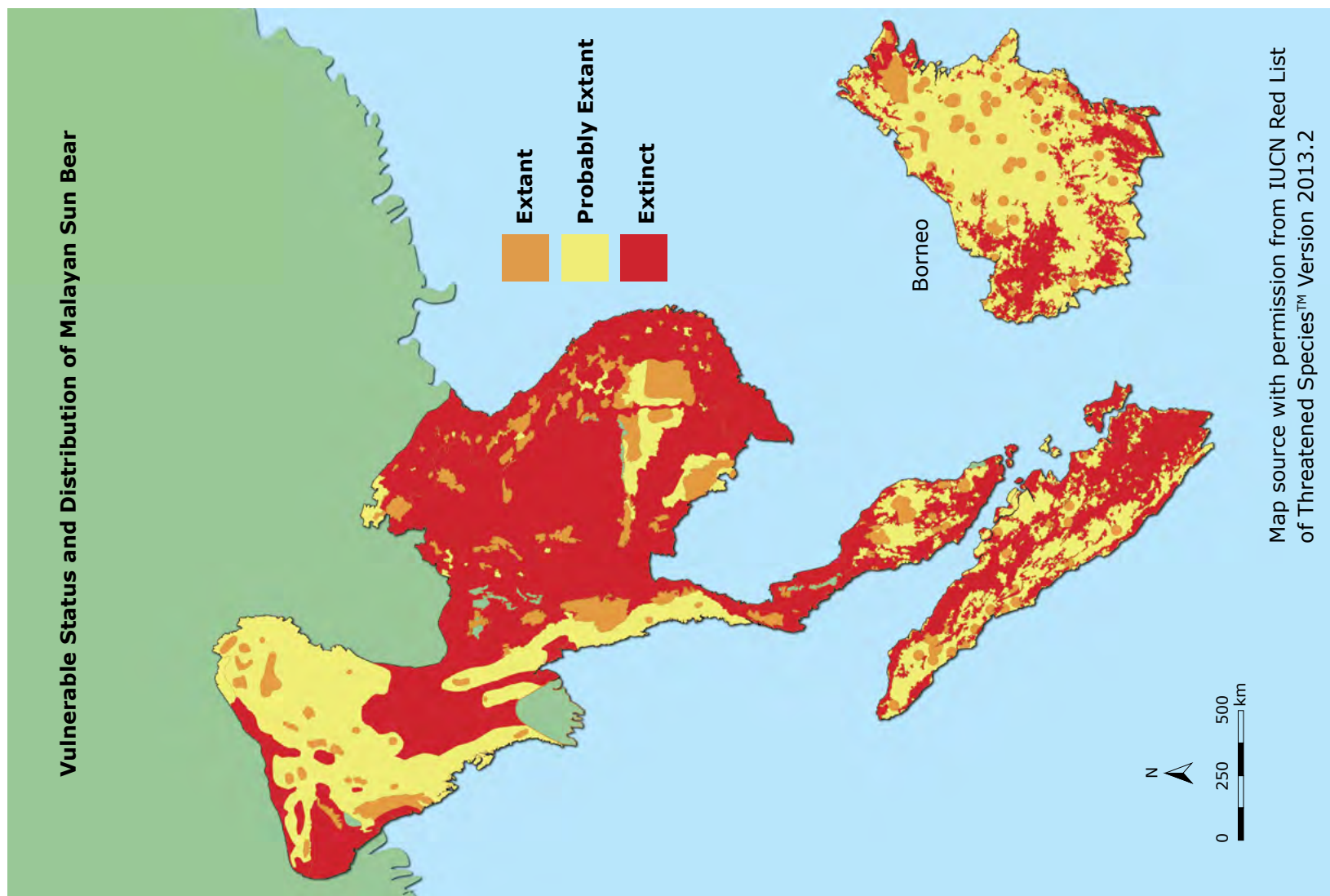
Sun bears have also been found in secondary forests (where the forest has re-grown) that have some primary forest traits.

In Borneo, male sun bears need at least 15 km² of forest habitat to find enough food to survive.

They spend much of their time in the tree canopy, as well as on the forest floor.

One way to sleep in the tree is to build a nest. This is a sun bear nest.





Sun Bear's Diet

What do sun bears eat?

Although sun bears are members of the order Carnivora (carnivores or meat eaters), their feeding habits are omnivorous. They eat a wide range of food in the forest including fruits, insects, invertebrates, small animals and honey.

Fruits

Sun bears eat hundred types of fruits found in the forest such as figs, acorns, wild durians and many more. Many of these fruits are available during fruiting seasons or fruiting years. In between fruiting seasons or fruiting years, when seasonal fruits are scarce, figs play an important role in a sun bear's diet because fig trees produce fruit all year long.

Sun bears often enjoy wild fruits while spending time in trees.



Acorn nuts.



Fig fruit.



Sun bears feed on wild seasonal fruits that grow in the rainforest.

Invertebrates

Sun bears eat many different types of invertebrates including termites, ants, centipedes, millipedes and beetle grubs. They especially like to feed on termites, ants and beetle grubs. Invertebrates are important food source for sun bears especially between fruiting seasons. Sun bears spend much of their time foraging in trees and logs for ant or termite colonies to feed on.



Tractor millipede.

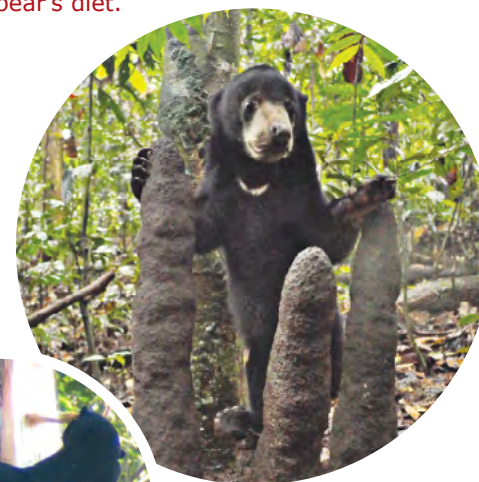


Pill millipede.



Beetle grub.

Termites are an important part of a sun bear's diet.



Sun bears will climb trees to get wild honey.

Honey

Locally known as "Beruang Madu" (in Malay) or honey bears, sun bears love eating honey. The availability of honey in the wild is very rare. Therefore finding honey in the wild is a special treat for sun bears. They have a keen sense of smell for locating honeybee nests inside trees and will use their long claws and teeth to reach a nest for this tasty treat.

Sun Bear's Role in the Forest

Why are sun bears important?



A sun bear eating a durian fruit.

Forest Planters

Sun bears consume a variety of forest fruits. As they travel they disperse the partially digested fruit seeds throughout the forest. Sun bears help to ensure the growth of these seeds by dropping them far away from the parent tree. The further away the seed is planted from the parent tree, the higher the survival rate will be.



Sun bears create cavities in trees that make homes for other wildlife.



Forest Engineers

Sun bears are excellent climbers. One of the reasons they climb trees is to harvest honey from beehives. Strong claws and canine teeth act as important tools for sun bears to tear open tree trunks and reach the honey inside. This creates a cavity in the tree that can then be used as a nesting site for other animals, such as hornbills and flying squirrels.



A sun bear using its canine teeth to forage in the tree bark.

Forest Doctors

Termites are social insects that live in large colonies. They feed on live trees and dead trees alike. There are some termite species that build their nests within a tree host which can eventually kill the tree. Sun bears love to eat termites. They will dig into termite nests and consume them. This helps keep the forest healthy by controlling termite populations and keeping trees alive.



By eating the termites on this tree, the sun bear cub helps the tree stay healthy!

Digging for invertebrates helps to cycle nutrients and keep the soil healthy.



Forest Farmers

When sun bears dig for invertebrates in the soil, such as earthworms, pill millipedes, beetle grubs, ants and termites, they help to enhance the nutrient cycle in the forest by mixing the nutrient rich and nutrient poor soil together. They mix the forest soil just like farmers plow their farms before planting.

What are the sun bears doing in the forest enclosure?

Digging

Sun bears dig to find food such as earthworms, ants, termites, and beetles. These are yummy snacks and an important protein source for sun bears in the rainforest.

Climbing

Sun bears are superb climbers. They climb trees to take naps, feed on fruits and invertebrates, and look for honeybees.

Socialising

In the wild, sun bears live alone due to a limited supply of food in the forest. They are together only when a mother is with her cub, or during mating seasons. Here at BSBCC, we keep sun bears in groups to conserve space and encourage healthy bear behaviour. This is part of the rehabilitation process.



A sun bear climbing a tree.

Social time for sun bears in rehabilitation encourages healthy behaviour.



Foraging for termite from a log.

Foraging

Sun bears sniff the ground because they are foraging for the naturally occurring fruits and insects available in the forest enclosure. They might also be foraging for fruits and vegetables given by our bear keepers.

Sun bathing/Resting/Nesting in trees

Sun bears often take naps in trees. They choose spots above the ground to avoid blood-sucking leeches and potential predators on the forest floor, such as clouded leopards and pythons. If you are lucky, you may see a bear constructing a nest or sun bathing.

Grooming

Sun bears spend a lot of time grooming themselves. They generally focus on their paws because they are important tools for climbing, digging, and eating.



A sun bear grooming its paw.

Why is BSBCC rehabilitating sun bears?

Before coming to the BSBCC, these bears were kept illegally in small cages. The trauma and suffering they felt could clearly be seen by their stress related behaviors, such as obsessive grooming and pacing back and forth.



Before entering the forest enclosure, sun bears are introduced to each other.



Stepping out of the bear house into the forest.

What is the rehabilitation process?

BSBCC team doing a sun bear health check.



1. Once a bear arrives at the BSBCC, it receives a thorough health examination to check for contagious parasites and dangerous diseases.
2. After the health check, the bear is quarantined for one month.
3. After quarantine, the bear is transferred to an indoor enclosure. It will be housed near other bears so that it becomes familiar to the sights, smells, and sounds of the other bears before being introduced.

4. Before a bear can go into the forest enclosure, it must first be put into a training pen so that it can learn how to avoid electric fences. This stage is very important because our forest enclosures are surrounded by electric fences that prevent bears from escaping. Bears are curious and are excellent climbers!



Resting on a tree branch in the BSBCC forest enclosure.



Sun bears teach each other survival skills in the forest enclosure.

5. In the forest enclosure, sun bears learn to climb, forage for food, and build nests. Most of the bears go back to the bear house at dusk. Some choose to stay outdoors overnight where they sometimes start to build nests or sleep in wood hollows in the forest. This is a good sign that they are regaining their healthy wild bear habits.

6. Our ultimate goal is for these bears to regain the lifestyle of a healthy wild bear. Bears that reach this stage of rehabilitation may be potential candidates for release back into the wild.

What will happen if the forest is gone?

Borneo has some of the most biologically diverse forests in the world. Many animals are dependent on the forest for survival. Thousands of animals lose their homes when the forest is destroyed.

The sun bear is a forest dependent species. Unfortunately, most of the rainforest has already been degraded by logging and clearing to create agricultural plantations, such as oil palm and rubber.

If unsustainable deforestation continues sun bears will have nowhere to live.



Deforestation destroys sun bear habitat.



Sun bear habitat is lost to agriculture development.



Did you know that sun bears are poached for their meat and body parts?

Sun bears have been hunted for generations in the jungles of Borneo for their meat and other body parts. Their meat was traditionally eaten as a food source by the indigenous people. Their body parts were used as medicine (bile from gall bladder) or for decorative purposes (claws, canines, and skin). Now, it is illegal to hunt sun bears in Sabah.



Sun bear poaching is punishable by law.



Photo credit: S.Yasuma



Hunting sun bear is illegal, but sadly still occurs today.

Sun bears are a "Totally Protected" species under the Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997. Those found in possession of a sun bear or its products could face a fine of up to RM50,000 or a jail term of 5 years (or both).

Despite this law, sun bears are continuously poached, mainly to feed the demand for exotic meat and Asian traditional medicine.

Yes, sun bears are cute but they are not your pets!



They do not belong in cages!

Sun bears kept as pets are often
traumatised by unhealthy conditions.



Being the smallest bear in the world, sun bear cubs are definitely cute! The problem is that people think that cute bears make good pets.

But...what happens when you keep a sun bear as a pet?

All of a sudden that cute little baby bear grows up! Then you have a dangerous bear that cannot be controlled. This is why most captive bears end up in chains or small cages.



Orphaned sun bears are
often kept in tiny cages.

A mother sun bear has to be killed before her cub can be taken as a pet for someone's home. In the wild, sun bears spend their first 2-3 years learning survival skills from their mothers. When people take them as pets, the cubs spend those years in small cages and never learn what they need to survive from their mothers. Most pet sun bears have suffered from mistreatment by their owners.

The sun bears at BSBCC are all ex-pets! These bears are here to regain their forest skills so that they can go back to the wild where they belong.

Sun bears are important forest animals that belong in the wild! They should never be kept as pets.

