

Mongabay Series: Almost Famous Animals

## 'Saving sun bears': Q&A with book author Sarah Pye

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by John C. Cannon on 29 June 2020



- *A new book, "Saving Sun Bears," chronicles the efforts of Malaysian wildlife biologist Wong Siew Te to protect sun bears in Borneo.*
- *Author Sarah Pye tells Wong's story, from his boyhood in peninsular Malaysia, to his studies of animal husbandry and wildlife around the world.*
- *Wong's journey led him to return to Malaysia and start the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre, the only facility of its kind in the world, in 2008.*

In his 2006 book, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* (<https://www.davidquammen.com/darwin>), science writer David Quammen says, "Some people admire soldiers, or surgeons, or firemen,

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Quammen wrote that “field biologists are, on the whole, a guild of extraordinary people — smart, passionate, patient, congenial, and physically as well as intellectually tough.”

That's an apt description of wildlife biologist Wong Siew Te, whose story author Sarah Pye captures in her new book, *Saving Sun Bears* (<https://www.savingsunbears.com/>). Wong is the CEO of the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (<https://www.bsbcc.org.my/index.html>), a rescue and education facility that he founded in 2008 in the Malaysian state of Sabah. The center cares for orphaned and confiscated Malayan sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus*). Currently, more than 40 of them reside in the rainforest habitat of the center, and in 2019, more than 84,000 visitors came to see them.

Pye's book traces Wong's path from his birthplace in the state of Penang in peninsular Malaysia through Taiwan, where he studied animal husbandry and met his wife, to Montana, where he tracked grizzlies and black bears and where his children were born.

It was a nudge from Wong's professor and future research adviser, Chris Servheen at the University of Montana, that intertwined his future with the sun bear's.

But as much as *Saving Sun Bears* is a biography of Wong and his relationship with this still-little-known rainforest-dwelling bear, it's also a clarion call — first, to save the sun bear, a cause Pye herself has taken up. Researchers still don't know how many live in the wild, but the combination of poaching, the wildlife pet trade and the animal's loss of habitat don't bode well for its survival. The way things are going, scientists say they could be extinct in three decades. Pye herself has started a Facebook group called Saving Sun Bears (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/savingsunbears>), and the book's publication has sparked virtual book clubs (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/uproarbookclub/>) around the world. But the book is also a call to protect and conserve the environment in our own backyards, as Wong has.

“Not everyone can get to Borneo. Not everyone can write a book. But if they don't have that capacity, they can still help the environment in their own backyard,” Pye said in an interview with Mongabay.

“[Wong] epitomizes this concept that one person can make a difference.” This interview was edited for length and clarity.



**You first visited the center in 2012, and that was just before it opened. Is that right?**

It opened in 2014. So yeah, a couple of years before it opened.

**What was the state of the center at that point?**

It took a lot of fundraising to actually get enough funds to create the center and then working directly with Sabah Wildlife Department and the Forestry Department to get the land and the access. It was quite a long process. In 2008, an organization called LEAP

(<https://www.leapspiral.org/>) (Land Empowerment Animals People)

helped them design a fundraising event called Bear Necessities, and that raised the majority of funds to build the center.

**You write in the book about all of the different organizations that have come to be involved in the center, including your university (University of the Sunshine Coast). Is it Wong's passion for sun bears and conservation in general that attracts so many people to work toward these goals?**

To me, he epitomizes this concept that one person can make a difference. The first day I met him, I asked how I could help. He said, 'Do what you do best.' That is such a broad call to action that it does enable anyone to be involved. I think that's one of his strengths. When people come to him with ideas, he just basically says yes.

A good example is [wildlife filmmaker] Chris Morgan, who came to Wong and said, 'I'd like to do a film about sun bears.' It took them 10 years to finish the film *BEARTREK* (<https://chrismorganwildlife.org/beartrek-trailer/>). They ended up with a fast friendship in the process, and it took a lot of effort to do it. But Chris did what he could to help the sun bears, so it just keeps growing with those powerful words.

**I have the sense he doesn't say no to a lot.**

He doesn't say no. I don't think he knows how to say no.





**way for these sorts of brokers to sell these animals for profit.**

It's a real shame. Wong [has created] different pillars (<https://www.bsbcc.org.my/our-work.html>) [of focus for the sun bear center]. One of them is education, doing a lot of outreach programs and trying to educate not just school kids and the next generation, but also people on the ground in the palm plantations or in remote villages that actually come face to face with sun bears.

**You mentioned in the book that, a lot of times, the people keeping sun bears as pets might not even realize that it's illegal, or what a dire situation the bears are in.**

Someone in a village thinks they're doing the right thing by saving a sun bear, caging it and feeding it. They don't know that that's illegal, and they don't know that there's a better option. There's a case in the book where I went out with one team to a palm oil plantation to do some education. It was an eye-opening experience for me because a lot of the people who work in the palm plantations were conservationists. They wanted to know what they could do to save these animals and not have to shoot them when they came on to the plantation. They wanted to know what the law was, what they should be doing and how they should be helping them.

**I'm curious about Wong's motivations. That's something you explored quite a bit in the book. What do you think propels him forward?**

I was so privileged to spend a lot of time with his siblings and learn a bit more about their background. It seemed like Wong was always linked with animals from the moment that he was rescuing small birds from the gutters and feeding them with a toothpick, and keeping fish in plastic-lined tanks. I think he's always had this affinity with animals. His affinity with sun bears is not exclusive. He's definitely a tropical ecologist. He's not just a sun bear researcher. He is aware of every single animal and what part they play in the biodiversity and ecology of the rainforest.

Really, that's been there all along.

**It was interesting to read that when he was younger, he wanted to own a pet shop.**

When he went to Taiwan, and he was studying animal husbandry, some of those experiences stopped him in his tracks. Going to an abattoir was a pivotal moment for him, realizing that he didn't want to work with animals that were considered a resource. He wanted to work with animals that were wild and free.

**It seems like Taiwan was eye-opening for Wong on the wildlife trade front. As you point out, Taiwan has pretty harsh laws on the books preventing this sort of trade. But in reality, he kind of pulled back the**

unless you implement it, it's pretty useless. And that applies in any nation, mine (Australia) included. We've got wonderful wildlife regulations too, but our koalas are disappearing rapidly, so every country has to have a look in the mirror.



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**You also write that Wong says he didn't choose the sun bear, that the sun bear chose him. Can you explain that?**

When he was studying wildlife at the University of Montana, he went to a lecture one day, and Chris Servheen, who's still in Montana, was talking about their research around the world. [He] talked about sun bears, and [for Wong], they weren't on his radar. Chris talked about how it would be great to have someone in Malaysia studying the sun bears. Wong described it to me as it was just like the rest of the room of students just sort of disappeared. It was like Chris was talking straight to him: I need a Malaysian person to study sun bears. [Wong] just couldn't wait until after the lecture to rush up and introduce himself. Chris was so enamored with Wong and what he stood for that, that he was willing to wait for two years, while Wong finished his degree to be able to work on the sun bear with him.

Chris feels that it was essential to have a Malaysian working on sun bears. And I agree with him. We so often hear of Western conservationists working in whatever country with the wildlife of that

connection with the wildlife. It's a cultural connection.

**He said something like, "Where else am I going to go? I have to stay and protect this place."**

When he said that to me, I felt a bit guilty there. I'm one of those people who can go home. But he can't — that is his home. So if sun bears disappear, and he hasn't managed to save them, it will be a constant reminder every single day that he wasn't successful.

**Talking about Wong as a field ecologist, the book captures the many hats that a field biologist has to wear these days — he's engineering the traps and solving problems that come up in the field. He's fundraising, he's telling anybody who will listen anywhere in the world, and then he's crunching numbers.**

He's a well-rounded, multifaceted person. He's probably better at engaging people and awareness through social media than anyone I've ever met. That's not something you expect of a scientist. There are so many angles to his ability, which I think makes him stand out a little bit. Scientists now have to be multifaceted. Otherwise, their science just sits on a shelf somewhere, and that's not going to be helpful in solving some of these major global issues. We have to have engagement by the majority; otherwise, we're not going to solve climate change. We're not going to solve habitat loss. We're not going to solve half of these major issues.

**On the other hand, there's a single-minded focus it takes to do the actual fieldwork. For Wong's master's work, over two years, he was able to trap just six bears. That takes an incredible amount of patience.**

Doesn't it? It's just incredible. And then once he had trapped those [bears] and collared them, it happened that his research was in the middle of a drought. So most of his research subjects died of starvation. Can you imagine that, after you've taken that long to manage to track them, that many of them die of starvation?



heartwarming story, and one of the pillars of the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre is rehabilitation. There are several reasons for that. One is that desire to have bears free, but the other one is that there are constantly new rescued bears coming. The Bornean Sun Bear Rescue Centre has created this sort of premise on this whole idea of trying to prepare bears for the possible release when possible.

Having said that, if you release an animal back into the wild, there's still habitat loss, and there are still poachers, and there's still climate change. There's still drought, and there are all these other things, then releasing a bear in the wild is not a fairy story. It's not going to always end well. So there's that risk, and a lot of researchers are not happy with the idea of rehabilitation at all. [Orangutan researcher] Gabriella Fredriksson realizes that there's a definite positive in awareness-building of releasing bears back into the wild. But there's that risk. In releasing bears, are you negatively impacting the low populations that there are? Who knows what the answers are to that? I was lucky enough to help release two rescued bears. We did it in the dead-set middle of Tabin Wildlife Reserve, which is twice as big as Singapore. We landed on a mud volcano right in the middle of that reserve and released them there. That's probably the safest place they could have been released. However, we don't know how many sun bears are there, and sun bears do kill sun bears for territorial rights. It's definitely a challenging one, this idea of rehabilitation.

**From your perspective, how much does Wong struggle with that?**

Wong is a very pragmatic man. I think he wants sun bears to be wild. That is definitely a driving force for him. But I think his pragmatic side also realizes that he's regularly getting new cubs that have been confiscated. It's the only rescue center in Sabah. The two bear houses are currently at capacity. If he doesn't release, what are his other options? Is it euthanizing bears as they get older? And is it euthanizing bears that don't have a potential for release? Is it farming them out to zoos? What does he do? I think the best of those options for him is to release bears back where they have the possibility of repopulating a wild species.



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**I ask this question a lot of wildlife biologists: Are you optimistic that sun bears will continue to exist in the wild?**

There's a difference between optimism and hopefulness. I'm hopeful actually with the issue that we're going through with COVID-19. I'm hoping that we will come out of this realizing that that our future is intertwined with the future of the rest of the planet, and humans are not above nature. And if we realize that, then I hope that we can make change that will positively impact all wildlife, including sun bears.

If we go back to the economic, money-based, capitalist society that we have currently built, I don't see much of a future for sun bears. It looks like we have about 30 years before they're gone, based on what we know so far. And that's not just sun bears. That's orangutans. And there are many small species that are going extinct regularly. So unless we start valuing the rest of life on Earth, I think we don't have much of a chance.

**You mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic. Has the situation we're now in crystallized the way you look at the case with sun bears and our relationship with the natural world?**

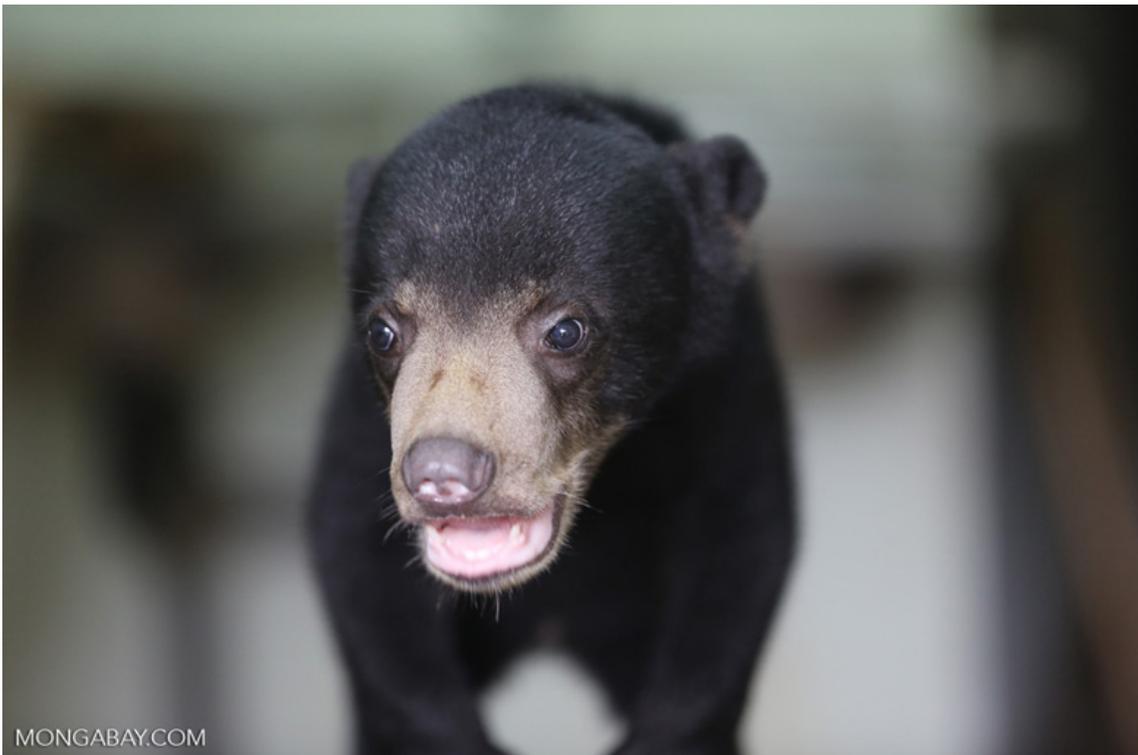
Absolutely. We are so interconnected. The wet markets where we expect that COVID-19 came from are a really interesting illustration that if we don't pay more attention to the way that we deal with wildlife, we will have another COVID or coronavirus in no time. I constantly hear on the

has come from animals. Most of the major issues that we have had with human viruses have come from animals and our animal agriculture, so it's time that we actually looked at how that works for our own survival.

**How has the pandemic affected the sun bear center? Have you been in touch with Wong?**

The center was closed for a couple of months. It just reopened last week. It was a very big struggle for the last few months to get enough food for the bears. All of the staff were laid off or put on hold where possible, and he's kept a skeleton team of bear keepers just to keep the bears alive. He scraped money from wherever he could just to get enough food and medicine to keep them.

The center is now open, so he's hopeful that people [will] start coming. I talked to him yesterday, and they were only getting 10 people through the door a day. As far as the number of visitors and the income that they used to generate, in 2018, they had 78,000 visitors, so when he's getting 10 a day, that's not going to help feed bears, He's so charismatic, and he just tries all sorts of different angles. Now he's doing virtual tours of the center, where you can pay to have a virtual tour of the center with him.



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**What do you hope people take away from reading the book?**

I've used sun bears to tell a story. The sun bear is the lens to tell the environmental story. Not everyone can get to Borneo. Not everyone can write a book. But if they don't have that capacity, they can still help the

and planting trees and cleaning up their neighborhood. The sun bear is a wonderful megafauna with a beautiful face, and they're cute, but there's a lot of other species. In my neighborhood, the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, there are 72 endangered species, and they all need help. **Maybe there might be another Wong in the group you talk to today.** Well, let's hope so. Let's hope it sparks some kid to be a scientist or a biologist.

*Banner image of a sun bear at the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.*

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