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# The struggles of Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus,* Cuvier 1823) (Mammalia: Ursidae): a look into their challenging existence

## BY

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***Abstract***

*Asiatic black bear (Ursus thibetanus Cuvier, 1823) is considered as one of the top carnivores in the animal kingdom, so it has a great impact in the ecosystem. Adequate information about this smart animal resulted its declination from some parts of the Asia as well as Bangladesh especially for poaching for bile, meat, skin, nails, and traditional uses and conflicts with humans as well.*

***Keywords:*** *Asiatic black bear, Bear bile, Circus team, Traditional use, Conflict, Conservation, Bangladesh*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Asiatic black bear is found with a moderate number in the world but perspective Bangladesh its number is decreasing (Naher, 2015) (Fig. 1). Asiatic black bear is categorized Vulnerable globally (Scotson et al, 2017; Garshelis and Steinmetz, 2020) and Critically Endangered in Bangladesh (Naher, 2015; Alam, 2015) (Table 2). The Asiatic black bear is one of the top carnivorous animals, so it has a special impact in the ecosystem. Moreover, due to its cave dwelling, other animals could get this hole as shelter. Sometimes, they hunt small animals but they like to eat plant-based feed. Hilly areas are suitable to graze bears. In fact, bears are solitary animals. At present, Sangu-Matamuhuri and Kassalong Reserve Forests of Bangladesh have been detected for the availability of Asiatic black bears (Akash et al, 2024). In most zoos (Kabir, 2019b) or Safari Parks, there are moderate numbers of black bears. Black bears both America and Asia have been the most successful in surviving human encroachment into their domains (Prater, 2005). In tribal people they have a tradition to eat bears' meat in their occasions. There is a myth about bears' bile for some traditional uses in tribal people (Kabir, 2014) (Table 2). Viet Nam is the country to produce bear bile. In taxidermy, whole body and head mount of bears are common everywhere (Kabir et al, 2021). In circus team, bear activities are common in home and abroad (Kabir, 2013; 2020) (Table 2). Black bears in Bangladesh are facing threats of shooting, trapping, and capturing by poachers for their flesh and skin, selling in zoos, and circus parties (Sarker, 2006) (Table 2). IUCN Bangladesh (2015) declared that the Asiatic black bear is decreasing. Due to habitat loss and adverse climate are susceptible to their inadequate number. Due to close contact with forest-dwelling people and the season of fruit harvesting, many conflicts happened (Kabir, 2019a). Bears were extirpated due to habitat destruction caused by the expansion of human settlement and agricultural land at the beginning of 19$^{th}$ century (Sarker, 2006). Bamboo clusters and young bamboo provide shelter and food for bears. In seasonal climates, foods include succulent vegetation (shoots, forbs and leaves) in spring, turning to insects and fruits in summer, and nuts in autumn (Bromlei 1965, Reid et al, 1991; Hashimoto, 2002; Hwang et al, 2002; Koike, 2010). The diet may vary year to year with differences in food availability (Koike, 2010). Asiatic Black Bears occupy a variety of forested habitats, both broad-leaved and coniferous, from near sea level to an elevation of 4,300 m (Sathyakumar and Choudhury, 2007). In some areas of Nepal, local people have reported Asiatic Black Bears higher than normal elevations, possibly a result of climate change (Aryal et al, 2012). Individual bears move to different habitats and elevations seasonally (Izumiyama and Shiraishi, 2004; Hwang et al, 2010). In some places the diet includes ants (Yamazaki et al, 2012) and bees (Hashimoto, 2002). Cooperation between

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the government and private organizations are also important to do more effective plans for the conservation of bears (Sarker, 2006; NCD, 2023; CDFW Director, 2024). Forty-three verifiable accounts of Asiatic black bear in Bangladesh between 2010 and 2022 (Akash et al, 2024) and its number in Asia has been compiled (Table 1). Bear meat carries *Trichinella* which is one kind of endo-parasite can be fatal to humans (Mikstas, 2024) (Table 2). The objective of this write-up is to promote further research for the conservation of Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*).

**Fig. 1.** Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*)

## DISTRIBUTION AT A GLANCE

Others have used a variety of ad hoc procedures to generate rough country-wide estimates. Largest populations occur in China (government estimate: ~28,000; Gong and Harris, 2006), Japan (government estimate: 12,000-19,000, with much wider confidence intervals; Ministry of the Environment, 2011), India (5,000-7,000; Sathyakumar and Choudhury, 2007), and Russia (5,000-7,000; Aramilev, 2006). Countries with the smallest total numbers of Asiatic Black Bears are Iran (~100-200) (Yusefi, 2013). South Korea's population was nearly extirpated, but saved by a reintroduction program (Jeong et al, 2011). It is believed that there were about 40 bears in the Republic of Korea population in 2015. Asiatic Black Bears have fared better than Bangladesh's other native bear species (Islam et al, 2013).

**Table 1. Availability of Asian black bears in the world**

| Country | Number | Sources |
|---|---|---|
| Bangladesh | 43 | Akash et al, 2024 |
| India | 5000-7000 | Sathyakumar and Choudhury, 2007 |
| China | 28000 | Gong and Harris, 2006 |
| Japan | 12000-19000 | Ministry of the Environment, 2011 |
| Iran | 100-200 | Yusefi, 2013 |
| Russia | 5000-7000 | Armilev, 2006 |
| South Korea | 40 (following reintroduction) | Islam et al, 2013 |

## PATHETIC CAUSES FOR DECREASING ASIATIC BLACK BEARS IN THE WORLD

**Traditional uses of bear body parts:** Bear meat is considered to delicious served in wedding and religious festivals by local tribal people of Bangladesh (e.g., Maghs, Chakmas, Garos) (Sarker, 2006). With the trophies of other animals, tribal people (so-called 'bede') sell medicine (manufactured by bears' body parts) especially for healing fever (Kabir, 2014) (Figs. 2-4). Rescued bears from the bile farms are suffered by disease problems, traumatic injuries, and behavioural patterns (Cantlay, 2018).

**Fig. 2.** Bear bile

**Fig. 3.** Bear meat

**Fig. 4.** Black bear skin

**Conflicts with humans and predators:** Bear attacks on humans have been reported during fruiting season (Blandfort, 1888). A number of black bears enter tea gardens within Bangladesh by crossing the Indian border. At present, this incident is rare for making a wire net by the Indian government (Sarker, 2006). Human-bear conflicts are a common incident in Bangladesh (Kabir, 2019a).

**Circus team:** Performance of Asiatic black bear (cycling, and fighting with animal trainer) in the circus team of Bangladesh is a common phenomenon. The mortality rate of such bears was found with colin pain and catch cold (Kabir, 2013; Kabir, 2020). According to the 'Animal Rights Act', wild animals are not permitted to show their performances (Kabir, 2013).

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## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This is urgent to make a detailed field survey of the Asiatic black bear which will be based on their habitat. Scientific management strategies and action plan are important to accomplish this project. Economic and technical supports will be implemented from the concerned authorities of a country. Among problems, poaching is the lethal criterion not only bears but also other wild animals. For the conservation of bears, the involvement of local tribal people is must. If we enrich our local trees, especially bamboo forest, bears could take their food and shelter as well. All sorts of awareness programme are effective for the protection of bears. Additionally, if we ensure employment for marginal farmers and tribal people through small-scale enterprise, they will not be interested to hunt this animal (Sarker, 2006). In order to protect Asiatic black bear, need to focus the knowledge on the behaviour of this animal. To understand the impact of this bear, everybody should be concerned. Illegal hunting, deforestation, climate change, and traditional uses need to be focused strongly for the conservation of the Asiatic black bear. In Bangladesh, there is no ongoing research project regarding Asiatic black bears. At the present context, we need to prepare a plan to achieve sufficient funds for monitoring this significant species.

**Table 2. Reliable sources about Asiatic black bears**

| Features | Examples | References |
|---|---|---|
| Status | Vulnerable and critically endangered is showing its alarming for the future | Naher, 2015; Alam, 2015; Scotson et al, 2017; Garshelis and Steinmetz, 2020 |
| Distribution | Except Bangladesh and South Korea, the number of Asiatic black bears are considerable | Aramilev, 2006; Gong and Harris, 2006; Sathyakumar and Choudhury, 2007; Ministry of the Environment, 2011; Jeong et al, 2011; Yusefi, 2013; IUCN Bangladesh, 2015; Garshelis and Steinmetz, 2016; Kabir, 2019b; Akash et al, 2024 |
| Habitat | Habitats are solely important for their survival | Izumiyama and Shiraishi, 2004; Sathyakumar and Choudhury, 2007; Hwang et al, 2010; Aryal et al, 2012 |
| Feed | The feed of bears is depended on season | Bromlei, 1965; Reid et al, 1991; Hashimoto, 2002; Hwang et al, 2002; Koike, 2010; Yamazaki et al, 2012 |
| Medicinal uses | Medicinal uses of body parts of bears are a serious issue | Sarker, 2006; Kabir, 2014; Cantlay, 2018 |
| Conflicts and predators | Conflicts with human is common in home and abroad | Blandfort, 1888; Kabir, 2019a; Sarker, 2006 |
| Taxidermy | Bear skin and head mount are a common decorative item | Kabir et al, 2021 |
| Circus team | Performance of bear in a circus team is common | Kabir, 2013; Kabir, 2020 |
| Disease | *Trichinella* is found in bears | Mikstas, 2024 |
| Conservation | Several conservation steps have taken for bears | Sarker, 2006; NCD, 2023; Akash et al, 2024; CDFW Director, 2024 |

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