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NEW STRAITS TIMES

LIFE & TIMES

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LIFE&TIMES GREEN

Save the forest

The sun bear is under threat. And that's definitely not good news for the equilibrium of our rainforest, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

KEEP in mind this advice when you first meet Wong Siew Te: First, don't tell him you don't know what a sun bear is. He'll probably chastise you with, "we Malaysians don't even know that we have one of the most important species of bears!"

Second, don't try to lighten the mood with, "...they're so cute." If you do, brace yourself for an outpouring of the woes that plague this animal and, its impending extinction.

If your initial contact with Wong is fraught with tension, endure his angst because what follows is a beautiful story of one man's passionate devotion to conserving sun bears.

Once calm, this 43-year-old father of two begins to describe the creatures in detail, "They can walk straight and carry their babies in the same way humans do. It's like watching a human in bear skin."

Sun bears are also very good tree climbers. Wong refers to them as "forest engineers".

"They climb trees to get at the honey in the bee hives. They use their claws to create a cavity in the tree trunk. These cavities, once abandoned, are very useful to hornbills and squirrels that use them to create nests. The other animals cannot make this cavity. If the bears don't do it for them, they'll have nowhere to nest."

A distinctive feature of the sun bear is its long tongue. "Sometimes, as long as 18 inches. They use the tongue to reach into cavities in trees to eat their favourite food, termites and ants.

"Sun bears love to lie on their back and pour the honey or termites on their chest and stomach. Their short hair will help them separate what's edible from what's inedible." For this, Wong describes them as "doctors of the forest".

"Sun bears eat termites. If they become extinct, we'll probably lose all our trees to termites."

"They play such an important role in the ecosystem and maintain the equilibrium in the forest, but we know so little about them. We don't even know what their life span is. I guess that, in the wild, they'll probably live between 10 to 12 years. In captivity, there's one in Honolulu that's 39 years old," laments Wong.

It doesn't help that sun bears have a slow reproduction rate and generally have only one cub each.

How did this interest in conserving sun bears come about?

Without pause, Wong narrates

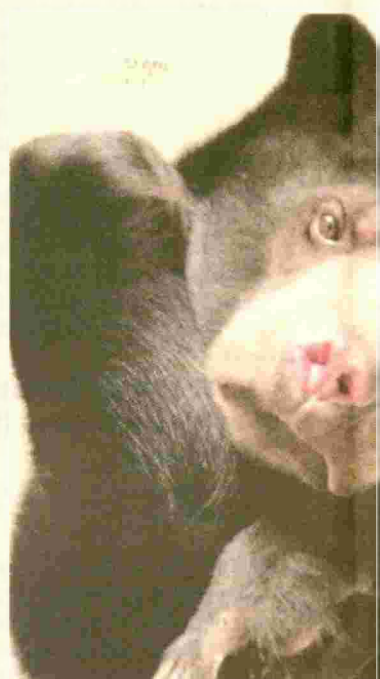


his journey to becoming a wildlife conservationist: "I've always loved animals. But, I grew up in the 1970s and '80s and never heard of wildlife conservation. When I was a boy, I used to watch birds. I never knew there was such a thing called 'bird-watching'. I always thought I would become a vet. I couldn't get into the only university that offered this course, UPM. So I went to Taiwan to study animal husbandry and veterinary sciences. There, I became an active member in the Bird Watching Society.

"Through my binoculars, I learnt to appreciate the beauty of nature. I also saw poaching of wildlife.

When Wong finished the pro-

It's a bear's



Cerah, soon to be a movie star



Bear essentials

Scientific Name: *Helarctos malayanus*

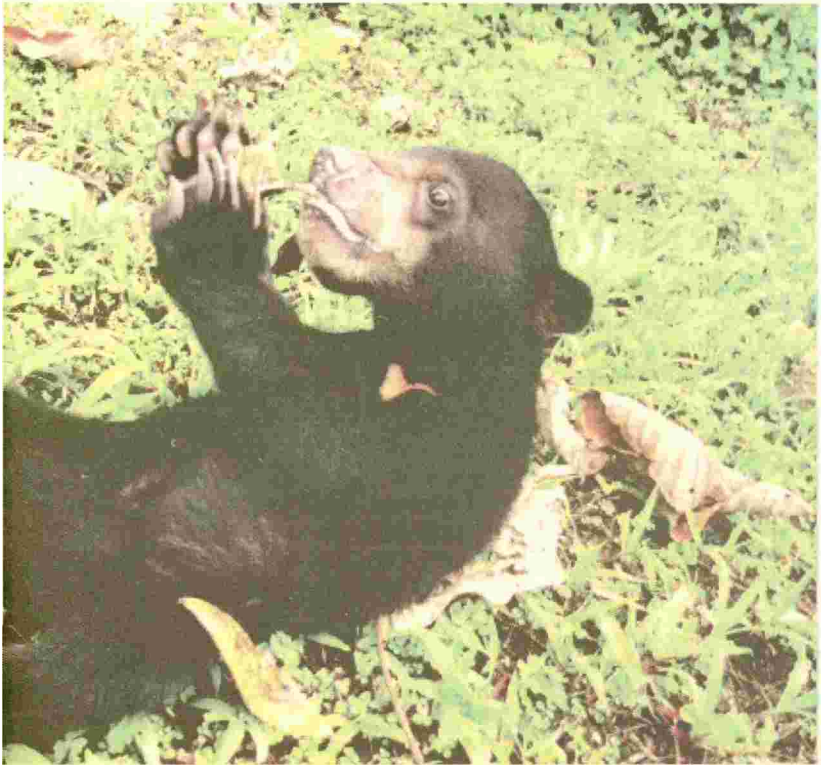
English name: Malayan Sun Bear, Sun Bear

Native to: Sun bears are native to Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam

Threats: Loss of forest habitat and forest degradation arising from clear-cutting for plantation development, unsustainable logging practices, illegal logging and forest fires. Poachers kill sun bears for their gall bladders (used in traditional Chinese medicine) and paws (as a delicacy). Other motives for killing sun bears include preventing damage to crops, and fear of bears near villages. When this happens, orphaned cubs are captured and kept as pets.

In 2007, the World Conservation Union added the sun bear to its "vulnerable" classification on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2007). It is now illegal to kill or hunt these bears in Sabah.

engineers



PICTURE BY WONG SIEW TE



Wong's world

IN 2008, Wong founded The Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC) in Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia. Admitting he could not do it alone, this is a joint project with the Sabah Wildlife Department, the Sabah Forestry Department and Land Empowerment Animals People.

Wong's aim is two-fold: first, to provide for the care, rehabilitation and release of orphaned and captive sun bears back into the wild.

Second, he wants to address the lack of knowledge and awareness about the sun bear. He also aims to provide an improved long-term living environment for captive bears that cannot be released into the wild. This would increase the protection for sun bears and their habitat and to allow for on-going research. To know more about Wong's work, visit <http://sunbears.wildlifedirect.org/>

"They play such an important role in the ecosystem but we know so little about them"
Wong Siew Te

gramme, he became his professor's research assistant. "Then, in 1994, at the age of 25, I started my undergraduate degree at the University of Montana. After a lecture, I went up to Dr Christopher Servheen and told him I was from Malaysia. He told me he was looking for someone to do research on sun bears. I agreed. And that is how I came to be here."

Wong's voice then takes on a sad tone. "The more I learnt about them, the more concerned I became. Bears in captivity are in a sad state. Zoos, mini zoos, crocodile farms, private menageries, and even private homes. These bears are kept in small cages and unhygienic conditions. Some of

them just pace up and down. Seeing them like this breaks my heart."

Spurred by their sad plight, Wong founded the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre that rehabilitates bears held in captivity so that they can be set free in the wild again. His rationale is simple: "I knew that if I didn't do something about them, no one would."

life

AT the moment, there are around 25 sun bears under Wong's care. You do not have to be an animal lover to understand, recognise and appreciate the mutual love between an animal and people highlighted in the five stories listed here.

CERAH

Cerah is Wong's favourite. She was confiscated by the Wildlife Department in 2007. Quiet and well behaved, Cerah is set to become a movie star as she is in *BearTrek*, a feature-length film about bears of the world. "This is going to be a proper movie in the cinema," says Wong excitedly. The aim of this movie "is to focus on the world's wild places through the eyes of the eight bear species of the world."

One of the people involved in the movie project, Chris Morgan, visited Wong in Sabah. When Morgan writes, "Wildly entertaining relationships evolve between bear and handlers during training until the day when we witness the emotional release of the cub," he is

referring to Cerah's absolute excitement when she's released into her forest home for the first time since being orphaned. You can watch this 10-minute video clip on www.wildlifemedia.org/borneo.html.

JELITA

"Jelita is Cerah's BFF," says Wong. "They're never more than 10 metres apart at any one time." Wong thinks that being orphans, they act as each other's protector and teacher. "They hang out and comfort each other."

NATALIE

Natalie's only 1½ years old. "When she first arrived, we almost lost her. She was dehydrated and we struggled to get the milk formula right. Then her condition stabilised and she responded really well. Natalie is a naughty little girl! When I used to walk her, she always wanted to play. But playing sun bear-style can be very rough and I had to tell her many times to stop biting my leg. She gets irritated with me. The thing is, even when they're playing, we

humans are not equipped to withstand their strong claws."

OM

"At 50kg, Om's a big boy," says Wong. Still, he's a gentle giant who is painfully shy. Hold a coconut in your hand, though, and he'll come out of hiding to take it from you. In 30 seconds, he will remove the husk. Then, he makes a hole in the shell, drinks the coconut water and eats the kernel. Do not assume that accepting the coconut is a sign that Om's comfortable with you. He'll finish his snack and retreat to his hiding place.

MARY

"Mary came to us extremely vulnerable. She was kept as a pet. Still, it's amazing to see how she sits in front of the computer and watches TV. But, after some time, I realised she was abnormal — her head is bigger than her body. She's a dwarf, almost."

Slowly, though, she is being rehabilitated by Wong and his team.



Om is a gentle giant