

Why are bears being farmed for their bile?

From [Calum Armitage, SpeciesUnite.com](https://www.speciesunite.com)

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Around [10,000 bears](#)—mainly sun and moon bears, but increasingly brown bears too—exist within the bile industry across Asia. Ripped from the wild as a cub (often after watching their mother get killed trying to protect them), any bear unlucky enough to find themselves on a bile farm will experience decades of confinement in a cage so small they're unable to stand on all fours or turn around. Most will lose teeth from gnawing desperately on the steel bars imprisoning them.



Industrial animal farming takes many evil forms across the globe, each with their own unique moral depravities and environmental baggage. Bile farming is one particularly grim incarnation of animal agriculture deserving of its own global protests, yet it is one that many are unaware even goes on.

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Forced starvation in order to produce more bile is commonplace, as well as painful unnecessary bile-extraction procedures with rusted equipment. Many 'bile bears', enduring years of endless boredom, also exhibit [trauma-induced behaviors](#) like repetitive swaying, rocking, and self-harming.

Why bear bile?

Bear bile is a digestive fluid produced by the liver and stored in the gallbladder, which some traditional Chinese medicine practitioners use. [The bile is rich in ursodeoxycholic acid \(UDCA\)](#). Unlike the vast majority of traditional animal medicines that have zero proven benefit for the human body—from tiger bone to pangolin scales—UDCA is actually capable of breaking up gallstones and helping treat some forms of liver disease. Proponents of bear bile often add to this by (incorrectly) stating it can cure hangovers, change hair color, and even [treat COVID-19](#).

Many who consume bile products view bile from wild bears as more potent, adding to severe population decline in already endangered species. Unfortunately, wild bear populations across Asia are in such sharp decline that brown bears in the U.S. have become targeted by poachers. After the kill, their gallbladders are sold and exported to other countries; a single organ can fetch the poacher somewhere in the ballpark of [\\$1000](#).



Bear on a bile farm. Credit: Animals Asia

Suffering on bear bile farms

Bears' sentience means they suffer greatly on the bear bile farms. They're highly evolved animals with intelligence comparable to the great apes. A [study on captive bears](#) found they were able to perform numerical tasks, distinguishing between different numbers of dots on a screen to get a treat.

In the wild cubs engage in social play, forming strong bonds with their mother who will offer protection and teach them necessary life skills. On a bile farm, these natural behaviors are obliterated. With no enrichment and no opportunity to roam (not to mention painful bile extractions), their lives are marked by unrelenting anguish.

“Some bears endure this torture for decades.”
— Maya Pastakia, World Animal Protection

Various [extraction procedures exist](#), all of them horrible. The ‘free drip’ method involves the animal getting a hole punctured in their gallbladder allowing for continuous reopening when it comes time to harvest; some have permanent catheters inserted that will likely never be changed throughout their many years on the farm, meaning catheters rust whilst still inside them; others are forced to endure bile extraction through a four inch needle. Bears often [moan and chew their paws](#) during the procedures.

“Complications arising from the extraction procedure include painful abscesses, chronic bladder inflammation, gallstones, and ulcerations,” Wildlife Campaigns Manager for World Animal Protection, Maya Pastakia told Species Unite. “This intense physical and mental suffering can last for years. Some bears endure this torture for decades.”



Bear on a bile farm. Credit: Animals Asia

Do bear-free alternatives exist?

Thankfully, it doesn't need to be this way, because modern technology allows for the easy manufacture of UDCA, the active compound found in bear bile, offering a more [ethical alternative](#) to traditional methods.

As wildlife organization [Animals Asia noted](#), over 50 herbal alternatives to bear bile also exist. Their work with local communities and schools in Vietnam has seen more than a dozen medicinal gardens flourish across the country.

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Three herbal alternatives in the *Coptis* genus have shown promising antibacterial, antiviral, anti-inflammatory, and cholesterol-lowering effects similar to bear bile in a [2009 study](#). The study's authors noted both bile and the herbwork in the same way to detoxify the liver.

In a more [recent study](#), researchers assessing *Coptidis Rhizoma* for the treatment of fibrosis found its effects are stronger than bile in the same experimental condition, as the herb's active compound berberine was capable of dramatically reducing oxidative stress on the body.

“[We] certainly believe that a future without bear bile farming is possible and consumer attitudes and behavior support this view,” said Pastakia. “NGO campaigning efforts in South Korea and Vietnam have led to a phase-out of the industry, with consumer demand declining as well. For instance, research by our local partner, Education for Nature Vietnam indicates a 61 percent reduction in bear bile consumption between 2009 and 2014.”

What can you do?

The U.S. is helping to fuel the trade, with hunters in the U.S. killing wild bears and selling their gallbladders. Mid-way through 2023 the [Bear Protection Act](#) was reintroduced in Congress to help combat this. If passed, it will help end U.S involvement in the bile trade by outlawing the importation and exportation of the product.

“It is especially important that a major nation like the United States enacts a law that would end interstate and international trade in bear parts and derivatives, like gallbladder and bile, and bear viscera products which would benefit all bear species worldwide,” argues Pastakia.

The major obstacle in the way of this act passing is a lack of awareness of bile farming. U.S. citizens can raise support by reaching out to [local representatives, asking them to co-sponsor the Bear Protection Act](#), noting that bears' continuing exploitation for a product that has many synthetic and plant-based alternatives proven [safe and effective](#) means bile farming is not only a cruel endeavor, but a needless one.

Please also [add your name to our petition](#) to voice your support for the Bear Protection Act. Together we can help protect bears from this cruel trade.

Jill Robinson has spent nearly 30 years of her life fighting to end bear bile farming. She is widely recognized as the world's leading authority on bear bile farming and is the founder and CEO of [Animals Asia](#), an organization that has been rescuing bears since 1994 and is devoted to ending the entire bear bile industry. Jill is one of the heroes of our lifetime. Listen to this [Species Unite](#) podcast episode, [S5. E19: Jill Robinson: Saving Bears from a Lifetime of Torture](#), to learn more.