



Sun bear

Helarctos malayanus

Description: The sun bear is the smallest of the bears, with a body length of 48 to 60 inches. Local peoples refer to it as the "dog bear" They can weigh between 60 and 145 pounds with the males being slightly larger. Sun bears have short, sleek black fur with a golden or white colored crescent shape on their chest and the same lighter color around their muzzle and eyes. The muzzle is short and the ears are small and very round. The paws of the sun bear are large with naked soles, possibly an adaptation for better tree climbing. The claws are long, curved and very pointed.

Range: They are found in southeast Asia; India, Burma, southern China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.



Habitat: Sun bears prefer lowland tropical rain forests. They are quite arboreal and are believed to sleep in trees.

Diet: Sun bears are omnivorous, eating birds, small mammals, termites, the young tips of palm trees and the nests of wild bees. They have been known to cause crop damage particularly to oil palms.

Social Organization: Nothing is known about the sun bear's social organization in the wild. Cubs are reported to stay with their mothers until fully grown.

Reproduction: Through observation of captive sun bears it is believed that cubs can be born throughout the year. Gestation has been reported at 95 days, at 174 days, and at 240 days at varying zoos so it is unclear whether there is delayed implantation. Litters consisted of one or two cubs weighing about 10 ounces (325 grams) each.

Conservation Status: Sun bears are listed in CITES as Appendix I.

Threats to Survival: Habitat loss in the sun bear's range is of major concern as is the pet trade, poaching for food, fur and the Asian medicinal trade.

Zoo Programs: An AZA Species Survival Plan for sun bears was formed in late 1994. Due to genetic and demographic deterioration of the current North American captive population, new founder animals must soon be imported. This needs to be done with an active conservation-linkage program in the range country where the animals will be obtained in order to protect and preserve as much remaining habitat as possible while at the same time carrying out intensive field studies on the sun bear itself. This is vitally important as so very little is known about these animals in the wild. The AZA Bear Advisory group recommends the establishment of an in situ conservation program and the importation of animals to be coordinated through the AZA Species Survival Plan working closely with IUCN-CBSG. Five zoos will initially participate in this endeavor. The Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle is working on a reproductive fecal steroid program. Woodland Park Zoo and the USFWS forensics laboratory are also working on genetic analysis of the North American population. All zoos currently holding sun bears are reminded to provide medical and necropsy reports to the AZA Bear Advisory Group veterinary advisor.

It must be stressed that zoos holding these animals put emphasis on the impact of illegal hunting and the trade of bear parts to the Asian medical market.