

Wildlife trade comes under the spotlight in Lao P.D.R.

With bear farming becoming progressively more difficult in Vietnam, the past few years have seen the establishment of a number of bear farms in neighboring Lao P.D.R. At least five farms are already known to be operating with around 150 animals between them (overwhelmingly Asiatic black bears) kept in typical small cages (1.5m x 2m). Using loopholes in the old wildlife law of Lao, many of these farms previously registered with provincial authorities to gain some measure of legality. The new Wildlife and Aquatic Law (issued by the National Assembly on 24th December 2007) determines principles, regulations and measures on wildlife and aquatic life in nature. Both Sun bears and Asiatic black bears are defined in the first (I) list for protection under the Wildlife and Aquatic law as a "rare and near extinct species".

A number of Governmental departments have recently been created or seen their remits increased in order to implement "inspection and investigation interrogation works against offenders of forestry law, law on aquatic animals and wildlife and regulations on forestry activities". These include the Department of Forestry Inspection (DoFI) and Department of Forestry Resource Conservation (DFRC), both within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

With the South East Asian Games being held in Lao PDR for the first time in late 2009 there has recently been an unprecedented increase in recognition of issues concerning unregulated wildlife trade and cooperation between Lao Government offices and international NGOs. This has resulted in the establishment of a working group made up of representatives of key government departments and INGOs including IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF and Free the Bears Fund. The working group seeks to address and advise on the key issues of illegal wildlife trade including bile farming and trafficking of bears.

Free the Bears Fund has been an active member of the working group since its inception and continues to be involved with supporting and developing cooperative strategies. This increased cooperation has resulted in a nationwide campaign for wildlife conservation (supported by ASEAN-WEN through USAID, Global Tiger Initiative and The World Bank as well as the locally active INGOs and companies) and the working group is investigating several opportunities for further campaigns. A recent "Lao-WEN" (Lao Wildlife Enforcement Network) workshop (as part of the greater ASEAN-WEN regional law enforcement initiative) was organized by FreeLand Foundation and again supported by Free the Bears Fund with generous funding by Hauser Bears and USAID as well as the joint Lao Government, Finnish Government and World Bank "SUFORD" Program. The meeting was held over two days in Vientiane in March 2010 in order to promote awareness of the new law and ensure that the roles of various government departments are clearly understood. Attended by over 100 officials from provincial Forestry Inspection offices, Department of Forestry, police, customs, military and CITES, the meeting provided an excellent forum for the sharing of experiences as well as creating a launch-pad for the establishment of a multi-agency Lao-WEN task force. It was announced at the meeting that all previous licenses for wildlife farms had been revoked and the government will soon begin inspections of existing wildlife farms to determine whether they are operating within Lao's national laws.

The Illegal Wildlife Trade Action Group is keen to continue to build on the momentum that has been established and continue to increase awareness and action on issues surrounding illegal wildlife trading in Lao PDR including efforts to eradicate illegally operating bear bile farms. Perhaps coincidentally, the week of the Lao-WEN meeting saw the arrival of five new bears at the Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre including four cubs which were

handed over to Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office and a sub-adult female Asiatic black bear that was transferred to the centre by authorities in Houaphan province. For more information on work in Lao please visit the website www.wildlifetrade Laos.org

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