Helarctos malayanus - Malayan Sun Bear

You are looking at...
The Malayan Sun Bear!
Researchers call it *Helarctos malayanus*.

*Scroll down for more information about me!* Photo credit: Merilyn Tang.

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Huh… What is it?
The Malayan Sun Bear. Photo credit: Merilyn Tang.

They are the smallest of all bears!

- Stocky build, large paws, short muzzle.
- Fur that is short, smooth, jet-black
- A (maybe present) patch of white/cream/yellow/orange fur on its chest, with a varying but usually U or V-shape
- Tongue that is long, and curly at the end
- Claws that are curved and pointed
- All four legs are turned in while walking.

*Singapore have sun bears meh?*

Yes… but only in the Singapore Zoo. It is present in Southeast Asian countries (surrounding Singapore!) so it may have been here in the past, although this author has not found any Singapore records yet.

According to the IUCN website, it is regionally extinct in Singapore.

Video credit: Merilyn Tang.
What do other people call it?

Malayan bear, Dog bear, Honey bear, Equinoctial Bear, Bruang, Beruang Madu
"basindo nan tenggil" - he who likes to sit high
(because sun bears love to climb trees)

Taxonavigation
Order: Carnivora
Familia: Ursidae
Subfamily: Ursinae
Genus: Helarctos
Subspecies: H. malayanus, H. euryspilus

What does it eat?

In its natural habitat, it is an opportunistic omnivore. That means it eats everything it sees - imagine a bear in a supermarket grabbing everything! It would get:

• honey
• fruits - e.g. figs, coconuts, bananas
• vegetables - e.g. sweet potatoes
• invertebrates - bees, termites, earthworms, wood lice
• small vertebrates such as rodents, lizards & birds

It's a sun bear's life!

It uses its sensitive nose to smell for food or mates, and uses its long, curved claws to dig in the soil or hollow logs. It makes grunts, snuffles, roars and sometimes short barks if scared. If threatened, or if it wants better views and smells, it stands on its two hind legs like a human.

Sun bears usually live alone and look for food in the daytime. Using its long claws, it spends almost all its time in the trees - sleeping, eating, avoiding predators, even suntanning! If humans disturb them during the daytime, sun bears will hide and only come out in the night time.
What happens if I see a sun bear?

Sun bears are generally timid, poor-sighted and will avoid attacks if possible. However, do not disturb them. Especially if they are injured or have cubs, they will attack.

Does anything scare the sun bear?

Tigers and reticulated python (Fredriksson, 2005) have been noted as its predators, although it is large enough to avoid being eaten. If it does get attacked, it has loose and wrinkled skin around its neck, so it can turn around and attack predators that bite it on its back!

What is its life history like?

Females are pregnant for 95 days, then give birth to one to two, sometimes three, cubs in dens such as dead, hollowed trees or between the gigantic buttress roots of rainforest trees.
The blind, hairless and helpless cubs have to depend fully on their mothers.
When they are 1.5 years old, they get their complete adult teeth!
They are ready to mate around the age of three, and have lived up to 24 years in captivity.

Where does it live?

It lives in the tropical rainforests of Southeast Asia, and likes climbing trees. Scientists define these rainforests as dense lowland tropical forests, dipterocarp/ lower montane & swamp forests. It can be found up to a range of 2800m above sea level!

The Malayan Sun Bear used to be found all over, but have gone extinct in a large part of Southeast Asia. The areas where it has gone extinct are shown in dark brown. Orange parts show its definite range, and yellow regions show where they might be found, but people are unsure.
Who named it?

Sir Stamford Raffles (yes, the founder of Singapore) first named it *Ursus malayanus*, meaning "a bear from Malaya". Later on, Sir Thomas Horsfield realized that it was unlike the other bears in America, Europe and Northern Asia. He described it as belonging to a different genus, *Helarctos*. The word *Helarctos* comes from the Greek and Indo-European languages, meaning the Sun (Hela) and bear (*rktos).
In some legends it is said that at sunset, the Sun greets and kisses the Sun Bear at the end of the day, which is why the Sun Bear has a white/yellow/orange patch of fur on its chest. Researchers think that this contrasting coloured patch is a survival bonus, making it look more threatening to rival bears and predators.
Did you know?

The animal that Horsfield described in 1825 used to be kept alive in the Royal Menagerie in the Tower of London, and was originally from Borneo. However, this author could not find where this original animal is now preserved; otherwise you might be able to compare this specimen with the bears you find, and see if Horsfield is correct!

How is it unique from other bears in the world?
It is the smallest, most endangered, and yet the least-studied of all the bears!

Based on phylogenetic analyses, Malayan Sun Bears are more closely-related to the polar bears than the giant pandas.

Here is a top-to-bottom comparison:

- Overall size: Smaller than other bears, usually 1 to 1.5m tall, from head to tail.
- Head: The head is more spherical, rather than oblong like those of polar bears.
- Fur: short, smooth and sleek; there are whorls of hair on its forehead and behind its ears
- Tongue: very long.
- Feet: have a bare and calloused portion that is shorter, and its soles are <1/10 of its entire body, unlike polar bears.
Use! Used together with its curved claws and protruding lips, these help it to get honey from bees' nests, and ter
In addition, Sun Bears do not hibernate because food in the tropics is available all year round.

**How come some sun bears look slightly different from each other?**

Each sun bear's chest patch is like a fingerprint - no individuals have the same pattern. However, there are different subspecies, i.e. different kinds within the same species.

| *H. malayanus* has a reddish-brown muzzle, and its chest markings are white. First described with a bear from Sumatra. | *H. euryspilus* has chest markings that are more orange than *H. malayanus*. It was first described with a bear from Borneo, by Thomas Horsfield in 1825. | *H. anamiticus* has smaller teeth (Meijaard, 2004). It was first described in Annam, Vietnam. |

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**Why is it important…**

**To me, or to anybody?**

There are fewer and fewer Sun Bears and if this pattern continues, we may not have any wild Sun Bears left for the future.
Please save my family and me :( 

Their numbers are decreasing rapidly, because of many reasons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loss of natural habitats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sun Bears' homes in the tropical rainforest are being cleared of trees, in order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Take the wood for human use (e.g. paper, furniture, houses),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Use the land for farming and other agricultural purposes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sun bears are removed from the rainforest because of...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Hunting and recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Also, they can threaten humans when they are looking for food, especially if their homes are destroyed by deforestation. They can destroy crops and plantations of coconut trees, oil palms, bananas, and sweet potatoes. Hence farmers hunt and kill them...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Domestication as pets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The cubs may be adorable, but do not keep the cubs; when they are older they are extremely aggressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- If you keep and then release them as adults, they will be unable to survive successfully in the wild, and you would have done them a disservice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Use as exotic meat, or to farm for their bile and gall bladders which in Asian folk medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sun bears are kept in small metal cages, where the bile is consistently extracted with crude and painful tools. Often, infections develop and shorten the life of the sun bears.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Other kinds of Asian bears are also used for this purpose.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Their skins are valuable</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Orangutans are facing the same problems as Sun Bears... Photo credit: Merilyn Tang.
For the other animals and the forest?

Sun Bears eat termites, and termites tend to feed on the wood of trees. The Sun Bears therefore helps to control the numbers of termites so that the trees are able to survive.

Sun bears also eat large numbers of fruits, and they indirectly help the plants in the rainforest! After digestion, the sun bears disperse their indigestible seeds so that the plants can continue to survive into the future.

To protect the world's plants and animals, a worldwide organisation called the International Union on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) was created. It has a Red List of plants and animals in danger. On this list, the Malayan Sun Bear is listed as Vulnerable (this is the link: __http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/9760/0__).

All international commercial trade of Malayan Sun Bears, like other Asian bears, is prohibited according to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Appendix 1. However, this lacks enforcement.

What can I do to help?

You might be interested to find out more, by following these links.

Online webpages dedicated to the Malayan Sun Bear:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of site</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compendiums</td>
<td><a href="http://bim.aseanbiodiversity.org/fob/speciesFinal/summary_species_2.php?idSpecies=416">http://bim.aseanbiodiversity.org/fob/speciesFinal/summary_species_2.php?idSpecies=416</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="http://eol.org/pages/328074/overview">http://eol.org/pages/328074/overview</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Helarctos_malayanus">http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Helarctos_malayanus</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/9760/0">http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/9760/0</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
http://sunbears.wildlifedirect.org/sun-bear-helarctos-malayanus/
http://bushwarriors.wordpress.com/tag/sun-bear/

Zoos
http://wildpro.twycrosszoo.org/s/0MCarnivor/ursidae/helarctos/Helarctos_malayanus/helarctos_malayanus.htm
http://www.arkive.org/malayan-sun-bear/helarctos-malayanus/
http://www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-sun_bear.html

Original descriptions:

Articles & publications:

What about my community?
- Tell your friends! Sun bears tend to be active at night (especially in human-disturbed areas), so keep an eye and ear out for them!
- Start a project to raise awareness!
- (add in your own)

What if I find a bear…

**How do I know it is this species?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check your bear: does it have…? Fur that is short, smooth, jet-black?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• A (maybe present) patch of white/cream/yellow/orange fur on its chest, with a varying but usually U-shape?</td>
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<td>• Tongue that is long and curly at the end</td>
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<td>• Claws that are curved and pointed</td>
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<tr>
<td>• All four legs turned in while walking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Muzzle that is golden-brown, orange, gray, or silver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ears that are small and round (40-60mm)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loose skin around its neck?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Body that is stout &amp; well-proportioned, with short legs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paws brown or tan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feet: five toes, but similar to humans in that thumb can only move laterally for unearthing soil. Hind foot 180-210mm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tail: half of which is made of “a tuft of rigid hairs”. 3-7cm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leave a comment?