

Bear Farms in South Korea: An End to Policy Deadlock in Sight?

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The establishment of bear farming in the Republic of Korea (henceforth, South Korea) in the early 1980s, predominantly of Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), as well as small numbers of American black bears (*U. americanus*) and brown bears (*U. arctos*) (Foley et al., 2011), was initially promoted by the South Korean government as a potential income source for rural communities, during a period of rapid, but uneven, economic growth. Bear farming was intended to supply bear bile and body parts for use in traditional medicine, as well as meat for human consumption, for domestic markets and for international trade (Jo et al., 2018). The native Asiatic black bear population had been severely depleted in the early 20th century as a result of Imperial Japanese large carnivore control programmes, so bears were imported between 1981-5 and used to establish a domestic farming programme (MOE, 2005a). The number of animals on bear farms initially grew rapidly (Mills and Servheen, 1991), but international trade was restricted following South Korea's accession to CITES in 1993.

Despite the Asiatic black bear's protected status under South Korean legislation, through the Wildlife Protection and Management Act (2005), domestic trade in bear bile (although not other body parts) remains legal. However, the number of captive bears and bear farms has steadily declined since 2005, when there were 1,454 bears across 93 farms (MOE, 2005b) and a 2007 survey found strong support among Korean bear farmers for abolishing the industry, if the government agreed to purchase their bears and provide compensation for lost income (Foley et al., 2011).

No such government support was forthcoming and the question of what to do with the remaining captive bears has stayed unanswered. While there is a successful conservation reinforcement programme for the single wild Asiatic black bear population in South Korea, located in Jirisan National Park (Jeong et al., 2011), habituation to human feeding and the indeterminate genetic and disease status of the captive bear population mean that they are not considered suitable for wild release. In 2022, the remaining number of farmed bears (322 animals across 20 farms) continues to substantially outnumber the wild population (approx. 70 animals) (KNPS, 2021).

A major development this year saw the South Korean government, associations of bear farmers, and NGOs sign a joint declaration to end bear farming by 2026 (MOE, 2022). In autumn 2022, attempts will be made to enact new legislation (Special Act on Bear Farming), which will formally ban the farming of bears for the purpose of wildlife trade. In addition, the provision in the Wildlife Protection and Management Act (2005) that allows Asiatic black bears imported into South Korea for the purpose of trade to be legally slaughtered is expected to be removed through a legal amendment. As a result, the Special Act on Bear Farming includes provisions that the state sets up 'sanctuaries' to rehouse bears from bear farms, with the support of NGOs, and that farmers maintain the health of captive bears until their transfer to these facilities. The South Korean government plans to build 2 public sanctuaries for farmed bears, with a total capacity of 120 animals. In addition, 2 South Korean NGOs, Project Moon Bear and Animal Rights Advocates (KARA), intend to establish a private bear sanctuary to increase overall sanctuary capacity.

It is germane to note that the proposed legislation currently mandates a continuation of the keeping and slaughtering of captive bears, as well as the trade of bear bile, until the end of 2025. It does not mandate any improvements to welfare standards on bear farms in the intermediary period, nor does it increase the likelihood of enforcement, or penalties for violation, of existing standards.

Despite the progress that has been achieved in the past year, significant challenges remain. Since the signing of the joint declaration, a presidential election in South Korea has resulted in a change of administration and it remains to be seen whether the proposed legislation will be fully enacted. The Ministry of Environment, the responsible government department, is yet to obtain support from the Ministry of Economy and Finance for costs associated with the proposed exit strategy, including compensation for bear farmers and the cost of construction and operation of public sanctuaries. Even if it does, the capacity of the planned public sanctuaries, 120 animals, falls far short of the total number of bears that remain on farms in South Korea, with farmers being unable to either slaughter the bears or

release them into the wild. While construction of a private sanctuary would increase capacity, the expense of doing so (estimated by Project Moon Bear to be ₩3bn KRW, approx. \$2.25m USD) is a major challenge for the modestly sized NGOs involved. In addition, the South Korean government currently expects NGOs to help buy animals from bear farms, despite them currently lacking the financial resources to do so.

An important area where the international community of bear managers could contribute is the current lack of widespread expertise in captive bear management in South Korea, especially as it relates to animal welfare. Previous studies have highlighted this weakness in the Korean zoo network, with most facilities without a system to adequately discuss and develop welfare improvements (Clay and Visseren-Hamakers, 2022). We caution that such expertise needs to be developed, in order to fulfil the stated aim of the 2022 joint declaration on bear farming to improve the welfare conditions of captive bears. To help address this, the expected successful passage of an amendment to the Management of Zoos and Aquariums Act (2017) will improve regulation of captive facilities, by introducing a permit system and raising core standards, for example around enclosure conditions and staff professionalism.

After almost 30 years of inactivity and policy deadlock, 2022 has seen considerable policy developments regarding the status of captive bears in South Korea. The outcome of these developments, though currently far from guaranteed, will likely be of substantial interest to researchers, conservationists, farmers and policy makers in other countries where bear farming occurs.

Acknowledgements

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Figures

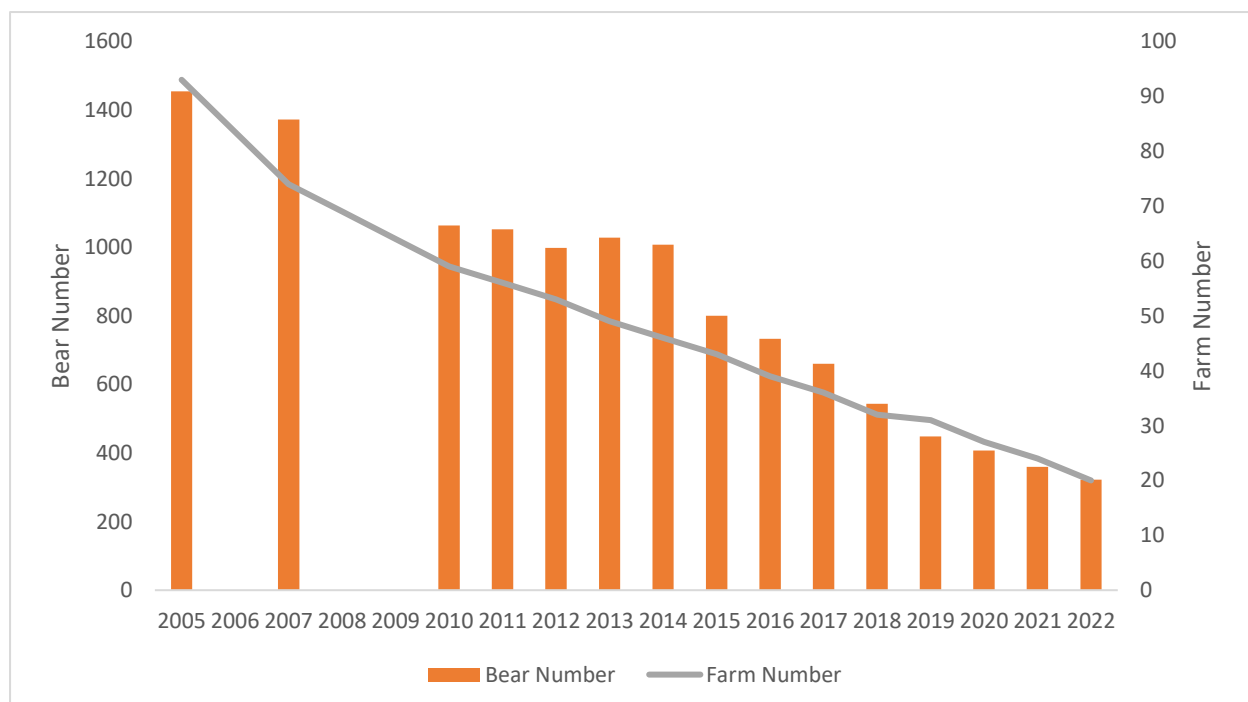


Figure 1. The number of bear farms in South Korea and the number of captive bears they held between 2005 and 2022, compiled from available Ministry of Environment (MOE) records.

Photos



Asiatic black bear on bear farm in Gangwon province, South Korea. Photo credit: Joshua Powell

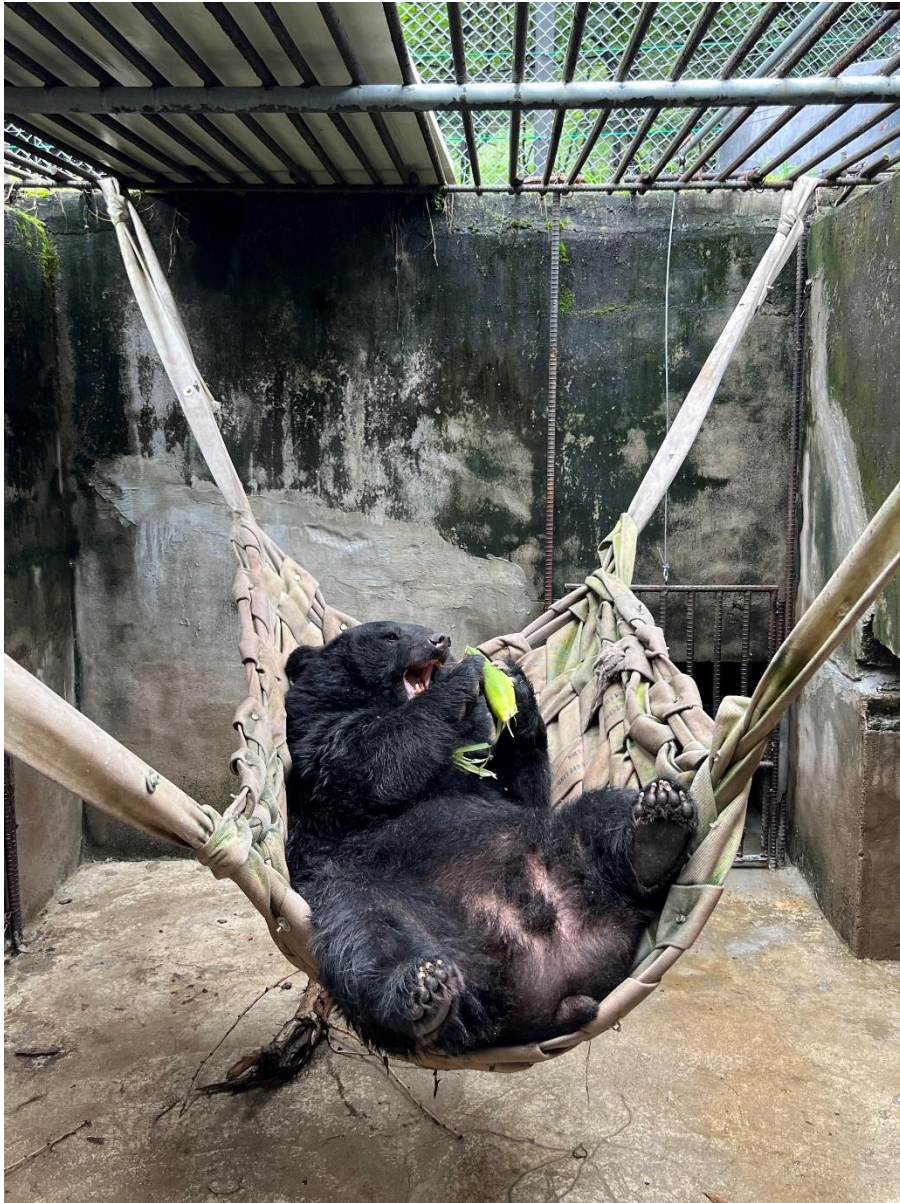


Officials from the Ministry of Environment visit a bear farm in Gangwon province. Centre of front row, left to right: Jin-kyung Jeon, Director of Korean Animal Rights Advocates (KARA); Jeong-ae Han, Minister of Environment, Republic of Korea; Taegyung Choi, Director of Project Moon Bear. Photo credit: Project Moon Bear



An outside enclosure constructed in 2022 by Project Moon Bear on the site of a bear farm, in order to temporarily improve the housing conditions available for captive animals there.

Photo credit: Joshua Powell



Hammocks provided by Project Moon Bear as enrichment for captive animals on a bear farm. Photo credit: Project Moon Bear