



# BEAR CONSERVATION

## Species Factsheet 3: Sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*)



Young male sloth bear - Daroji Sloth Bear Sanctuary, India (L Shyamal)

### OVERVIEW

Sloth bears are found in the forests and grasslands of south Asia, predominantly in lowland areas. They are a small bear and have shaggy black coats, cream coloured snouts and usually a white “Y” or “V” shape on their chests.

Mostly nocturnal the bears are omnivorous with termites and ants the main constituents of their diet. The bears use their claws to open the insects’ mounds and nests, sucking them up through a gap in their front teeth. They are also very fond of honey, hence their alternative name of “honey bear”.

Sloth bears do not hibernate and whilst solitary, except for mothers with cubs, seem to tolerate one another in shared ranges. Length varies from 140 to 190 centimetres. Males weigh between 80 and 140 kilograms, and females between 55 and 95 kilograms.

Mating mainly occurs in May, June and July with gestation taking six to seven months. The young are born in earth dens and litters are usually of one or two cubs although litters of three cubs have been reported. The young remain with the mother for upwards of two years. Unique amongst bears, the cubs often ride on their mother’s back.

Sloth bears are classed as vulnerable with a decreasing population due to habitat loss and poaching. Longevity is from 20 to 25 years.

## STATUS

The sloth bear is classified as “vulnerable” on the IUCN Red List. It is listed in Appendix I of CITES. They are protected under the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance of Sri Lanka. The bears are killed by farmers because of damage to crops, and also by hunters seeking their gall bladders for use in Asian medicine.

## DATA

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata

**Class:** Mammalia

**Order:** Carnivora

**Family:** Ursidae

**Genus and species:** *Melursus ursinus* (Shaw, 1791)

**Size:** At shoulder typically 65 to 85 cm, head-body length 140 to 190 cm

**Weight:** Males 80 to 150, females 55 to 100 kg

**Life Expectancy:** In the wild around 20 to 25 years. Up to 40 years in captivity

**Also known as:** Stickney bear or labiated bear

## DESCRIPTION

Sloth bears are stocky with long, shaggy, black hair and a white “U” or “Y” shaped chest marking. They have large lips, a long tongue, a pale muzzle and well-developed hook-like claws that enable them to climb trees and dig for termites.

## RANGE

The bears are found in Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan and Nepal. There may still be bears in the wet forests of Bangladesh but this is by no means certain. The bears inhabit both dry and moist deciduous forests and grasslands.

## RECOGNISED SUBSPECIES

Common sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus ursinus*)

Sri Lankan sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus inornatus*)

## EVOLUTION

The origins of the *Melursus ursinus* are somewhat speculative as the fossil evidence for their evolutionary history is sketchy and incomplete. They are a member of the subfamily Ursinae and they were in existence at least 1.6 million years ago but possibly as long ago as five to six million years. It seems likely that they evolved on the Indian subcontinent, their present-day range along with the island of Sri Lanka. Ancestral sloth bears may well have entered the subcontinent during an inter-glacial period and then developed there in isolation when the ice returned creating a northern barrier to arrivals and departures in the form of the Himalayan glaciers and snowfields.

## POPULATION HISTORY

Sloth bears were once present throughout the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka, spreading northwards into present day Nepal and Bhutan. Historically the western boundary of their range was Gujarat in India and it has been suggested that they may at one time have been found as far east as present day Myanmar, although this has not been verified. The bears are still present in much of their former range but populations are now very fragmented (see “Current Situation” below).

## RANGE

Sloth bears are only found on the Indian subcontinent and are present in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. Until recently they were also found in Bangladesh but in October 2014, after an [extensive survey](#), were declared extinct in that country by the Red List project. There have been no confirmed sightings since the 1990s.

On the island of Sri Lanka the bears are now restricted to the northern and eastern lowlands. Within India the distribution is patchy and limited to forested areas. In Nepal the population is separated from that of India with bears being found in the Siwalik Hills and in the lowlands. In Bhutan the bears are confined to the south of the country. (See map on page 4.)

### POPULATION

Generally, population data on sloth bears is sketchy and for many parts of the bears' range is non-existent. A best guess would seem to place the total world population at somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000. The IUCN classifies the population as decreasing.

### HABITAT

Common sloth bears are found in forests, scrub areas and, during the dry season, grasslands. Sloth bears are mainly found in tropical forests, scrub areas and in grasslands during the dry season. They prefer areas which are remote from human beings.

### DIET

The bears are omnivorous with fruit, termites and ants all major parts of their diet. In those areas where bears eat greater quantities of fruit (up to 90 percent of their diet) human land use and presence may well be causing them to avoid their preferred diet of termites and ants. They also eat other insects and larvae, nuts, leaves, flowers, roots, honey, eggs and small mammals. They will take carrion when available.

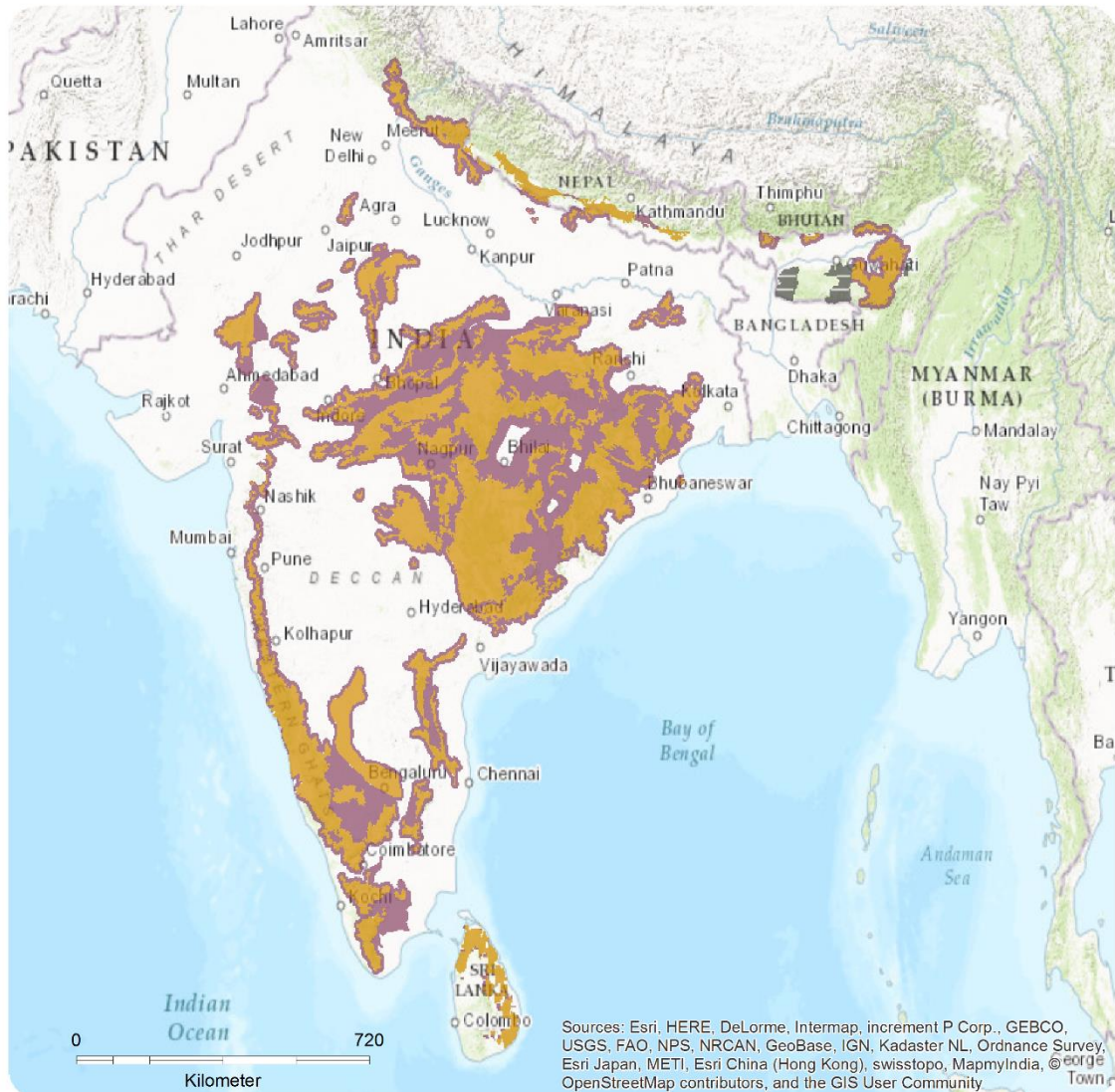
### SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Mainly nocturnal sloth bears often sleep in caves during the day. Whilst the bears do not hibernate they are much less active during the rainy season. They are excellent climbers and have a keen sense of smell compared to which their eyesight and hearing seem relatively poor. Usually solitary except for mothers with cubs and during mating although there is some evidence that sloth bears are not territorial and will sometimes associate with one another. Males have been observed in the company of females with cubs.



Sri Lankan sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus inornatus*) in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka (Bodhitha)

# SLOTH BEAR DISTRIBUTION MAP



### Range

- Extant (resident)
- Possibly Extant & Origin Uncertain (resident)
- Possibly Extant (resident)
- Presence Uncertain

### Compiled by:

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The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply any official endorsement, acceptance or opinion by IUCN.



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## LIFE CYCLE

Mating commonly occurs during May to July but does vary by region and in Sri Lanka can occur at any time during the year. Research indicates that in India mating most commonly occurs in June. Most births occur from September to January following a six or seven month gestation period. Females usually give birth in a cave or in a shelter built on the ground, usually to one or two cubs but sometimes to three. Cubs remain with their mother for 18 months to two years, during which time she will not become pregnant again.

For more specific descriptions of habitat, diet and life cycle please refer to the individual pages for the two subspecies of sloth bear on our website ([here](#) and [here](#)) and to the reading list below.

## CURRENT SITUATION

As with most bears the greatest threat to the sloth bear is habitat loss. Human encroachment has resulted in the wholesale destruction of forest habitat which is then superseded by agricultural land and monoculture plantations. This displaces bears and also fragments their habitat reducing the gene pool and opportunities for breeding. With the increasing proximity of humans to bears conflicts increase and opportunities for poaching for the body-parts market are also facilitated. Bears are killed by farmers to prevent the destruction of crops and to negate perceived or actual threats to livestock.

Historically bears have been poached to be used as captive dancing bears but this is declining and in 2012 it was announced that all Kalandar tribesmen had ceased the practice of keeping dancing bears. Poaching still occurs to obtain bear parts and bear bile for use in medicine and bears are also hunted and killed due to their reputation for aggression towards humans and for crop destruction. Tigers have been known to attack, kill and eat sloth bears and there is a suggestion that leopards may also do so.

## THE FUTURE

As development continues in both India and Sri Lanka the pressure on sloth bear habitat is likely to grow. A number of bears exist inside designated Protected Areas, Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks within India. The bears are protected under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act but the future of populations outside designated areas seems uncertain at best. At least half of the bears live outside protected zones in both India and Pakistan. There seems no reason to expect a reduction in conflicts with humans and given the aggressive nature of the bears such encounters will almost always ultimately result in the deaths of a number of bears.

In order to create a viable future for these bears the destruction and fragmentation of their habitat needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Reforestation programmes will also be fundamental to a halt of the decline in bear numbers, coupled with local education initiatives to both reduce conflicts between people and bears and to promote local and national conservation measures.

## CONSERVATION

Sloth bears face a number of critical conservation issues:

- Habitat loss and fragmentation, often as a result of forestry and agricultural operations
- Conflicts with humans
- Poaching for the body parts trade and capture of live animals for use as dancing bears
- Climate change and its effects on habitat and food supplies

Below is more detail on these issues together with information on how they are or should be addressed.

### **Habitat protection and restoration**

All bears are wide-ranging and need relatively large areas of undisturbed habitat if they are to thrive. With a rapidly expanding human population the pressures on sloth bear habitat are significant in many of the places where they are found. Indirect pressure caused by logging and the clearance of land for agriculture is a particular and significant issue.

As well as wholesale habitat destruction, habitat fragmentation can be just as serious to the continuance and health of sloth bear populations; both lead to an increased risk of conflict with humans. It is imperative that national and local governments and other relevant authorities work with foresters, farmers and villagers to protect remaining habitat and to instigate, where feasible, habitat restoration schemes through reforestation.

### **Reducing conflicts**

Sloth bears are reported to be present in 174 of India's Protected Areas (PAs), including 46 National Parks and 128 Wildlife Sanctuaries. Populations appear to be reasonably well protected inside these PAs, but around two thirds of sloth bears in India live outside them and face deteriorating habitats. About half the occupied range in Sri Lanka is outside protected areas.

Outside the PAs conflicts between humans and sloth bears are most commonly associated with the raiding of agricultural crops including various fruit crops, maize, potatoes and yams. Sloth bears can display aggression towards humans and will, in certain circumstances, attack with human fatalities sometimes resulting. As a direct result they are widely feared. Normally the bears seem to try to avoid contact but, because of their reputation as "dangerous animals" in a number of communities they are actively persecuted, pursued and killed.

It is to be hoped that the educational initiatives already underway in some areas may help to reduce conflicts and enhance a conservation ethic among local human populations. However, the root of the problem is deteriorating habitat (see above), with the resultant increases in encounters between humans and bears. Thus, habitat improvements (government or community-based reforestation) would clearly be beneficial in alleviating such conflicts.

### **Enforcement operations against poaching & the trafficking of bears & body parts**

Sloth bears are listed in Appendix I of CITES and are completely protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act and to varying degrees by national laws in other range countries. However, enforcement is at best patchy and often virtually non-existent.

In India, sloth bears are poached for their gall bladders and other body parts which are used in traditional Chinese medicine. Live sloth bears, usually cubs are still illegally captured for use as 'dancing bears' and in bear bile farms. The mother bear is usually killed to facilitate the capture of her cub or cubs. The trade in bear body parts and live animals is extremely lucrative and is strongly linked with international organised crime. If the trade is to end more attention, and funding, needs to be directed towards ending the demand for bear bile, paws and other body parts, hides and live animals.

In the UK Operation Charm is a unique partnership working to stop the illegal trade in bears and other endangered species in London. Launched by the Metropolitan Police it works by using a combination of enforcement and crime-prevention initiatives including the raising of public awareness of the issues. The ultimate aim is to end the consumer demand which drives the trade and threatens the survival of brown bears and other endangered species all over the world.

### Ameliorating the effects of climate change

The amount of vegetation in the world, and the way it is spread across the planet, has changed significantly in the last three decades and much of this is due to the changing climate. Historically when foodstuffs failed or became locally extinct, sloth bears were able to relocate into new ranges, but this is becoming increasingly difficult due to habitat fragmentation

In the short to medium term the best way to ameliorate these effects is to restore and protect existing habitat and to create corridors between isolated areas of habitat. In the longer term it is to be hoped that the effects of climate change can be halted and, ultimately, reversed.

### LINKS

[Free the Bears Fund](#) supports animal welfare projects in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, working with rescued and confiscated Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), Sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), and Sloth bear (*Ursus ursinus*). A sister charity Free the Bears UK was established in the United Kingdom in 2010.

[Wildlife SOS India](#) was established in 1995 to protect and conserve India's natural heritage, forests and wildlife wealth. Today, the organization has evolved to actively work towards protecting the Indian wildlife, conserving habitat, studying biodiversity, conducting research and creating alternative and sustainable livelihoods for erstwhile poacher communities. Wildlife SOS is best known for its work with 'dancing bears'.

[World Society for the Protection of Animals \(WSPA\)](#) is working to rescue captive bears and bring an end to the use of these animals for entertainment as [dancing bears](#).

### [Operation CHARM](#)

### FURTHER READING

"Characteristics of sloth bear attacks and human casualties in North Bilaspur Forest Division, Chhattisgarh, India" by Bargali, H. S.; Akhtar, Naim; Chauhan, N. P. S. (2005). *Ursus* 16 (2): 263–267. [Click here to open pdf file](#)

"The Sloth Bear", by Barbara Hadley. IUCN/SSC. Bear Specialist Group. IAR.org.uk [Click here to open pdf file](#)

"Sloth Bear *Melursus ursinus*", Final draft: Chapter for the book "Mammals of South Asia" (Eds. Johnsingh, A. J. T. and Manjrekar, N.), By K. Yoganand, Clifford G. Rice and A. J. T. Johnsingh- [Click here to open pdf file](#)

### CITATIONS

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Fredriksson, G., Steinmetz, R., Wong, S. & Garshelis, D.L. (IUCN SSC Bear Specialist Group) 2008.

Published by Bear Conservation 29 March 2015

Updated (links) 18 March 2018

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