

# Researchers discover unknown consumer base for unsustainable bear product use

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In their efforts to better understand ongoing wildlife trafficking and the dynamics of unsustainable bear product use by consumers in Cambodia, a team of researchers led by San Diego Zoo Global made an unexpected

discovery: The use of bear bile and body parts in traditional remedies consumed by new and pregnant mothers.

The use of traditional medicines derived from bear bile and gallbladders by young and expecting mothers for ailments related to pregnancy had not been previously documented. With populations of wildlife—including bears—in decline across Southeast Asia, understanding this large consumer base could inform [conservation efforts](#) in the region, the researchers wrote in a study published recently in the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*.

"To effectively conserve bear populations, we must reduce poaching of bears through reducing demand pressures such as use of bear bile for [maternal health](#)," said Elizabeth Oneita Davis, Ph.D., the study's lead author, a postdoctoral associate in Community Engagement at San Diego Zoo Global. "In Cambodia, we are currently working in a rural community to encourage [older women](#) to support expecting mothers by accompanying them to the doctor and advising them to take biomedicine."

For this study, the researchers interviewed 122 women in seven Cambodian provinces, each with its own ethnic makeup and level of development, from 2016 to 2019. They found that [pregnant women](#) and new mothers used bear products for pregnancy and post-partum-related ailments, including headaches, abdominal cramps, diarrhea and symptoms that may be described as post-partum depression.

Though Western medicine is widely accepted in Cambodia, it exists alongside traditional medicine practices similar to those found in China and Vietnam, with treatments derived from plants and animals—including rhinoceroses, slow lorises and bears. Currently, researchers do not have a deep understanding of when and why traditional medicine is used instead of Western treatments. The

researchers have previously estimated that up to 15% of Cambodians use bear products, but that percentage could rise if women continue or increase their current usage for maternal health reasons.

"Beyond bear bile, there is a lack of data around other illegal wildlife products, which may also be used for uterine issues, with the same possible implications of pressure on wildlife populations," Davis said. "In general, the role of women in wildlife trade is largely neglected in research."

In the case of new and expectant mothers, bear products are often taken at the urging of women in their "kinship networks," who care for one another during and after pregnancy, the researchers found. The authors said the study could help shape how Khmer women can promote their reproductive health while protecting bear populations in Cambodia. Older, influential [women](#) should be encouraged to promote Western medicine or non-wildlife-based traditional medicine for their young, pregnant kin, they suggested.

**More information:** Elizabeth Oneita Davis et al, Bear bile use at the intersection of maternal health in Cambodia, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1186/s13002-020-00380-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13002-020-00380-6)

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