

Conserving Tibetan Brown bears in Tibet

The Tibetan brown bear (*Ursus arctos pruinosus*) is perhaps the least known and least studied of the world's subspecies of brown bears. Tibetan brown bears were formerly abundant on the open steppes of Tibet, over the past few decades, the population of these bears has declined drastically. Concurrent with the decline, conflicts between Tibetan brown bears and nomadic livestock herders in Tibet have increased. Such conflicts are diverse, including the killing of livestock both in corrals and on open pastures; damage to homes, home furnishings, and corrals; loss of large quantities of meat, flour, oil, and other stored human foodstuffs; and the occasional injury or even death of herders. It appears that many brown bears in the region now subsist to a significant degree on human foodstuffs, and young bears may be more apt to learn the skills of obtaining human-related foods than hunting pikas. In the spring of 2006, the WWF China-Lhasa Field Office conducted a survey to evaluate the extent of conflict between humans, bears, and other large mammals in the south-central Chang Tang region. Results revealed that an alarming 60% of survey respondents in Tibet's Shenzha County had experienced conflict with brown bears since 1990, and that the frequency of conflict with brown bears had increased 4.7 fold between 1990 and 2006. A particularly large surge in conflicts occurred since 2004. This is believed to be due in large part to rigorous enforcement over the past six years of nature reserve regulations banning hunting and the possession of firearms.



Photo 1: Tibetan Brown Bear

The conflict between the brown bear and local herder has become the major threat for brown bear conservation in the Chang Tang. The herders are often committed to quiet killing of bears, and the bears continue to deliver damages to the livestock and herders' tents and houses. It is certain that the conflict

continue to increase and its social and conservation impacts must be enlarged as well. Therefore, there is a great demand for conservation measures to tackle the issue, and establish a safe survival environment for both local herders and the brown bears.



Photo 2: Conducting bear-human conflict survey (Left, Dawa Tsering)

Besides the conflict study WWF Lhasa office has implemented compensation fund projects to lessen the negative impact of the conflict with its local partners. However, the compensation fund is a short-term remedy and it only helps the local herders to overcome with one particular incident, but it cannot resolve the problem. In order to address the issue and to reduce its social and conservation impacts, WWF Lhasa office has taken a pioneering step to introduce some new alternatives with financial supports of Sr. Peter Scott Fund and the Bridget Fund.



Photo 3: House was damaged by Tibetan Brown Bear

With financial support (32,300 Swiss Francs) of Sr. Peter Scott Fund, WWF will train local herders and reserve rangers for reducing human-bear conflict and conflict data gathering, improve house and corral quality to prevent conflict, build fences for houses and corral, introduce Bear-proof food storage containers, and establish one compensation fund in the Chang Tang with local communities and government partners. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve government policies on bear conservation and introduce WWF's experiences on the conflict resolution to the local government, and therefore the government is capable of addressing the bear-human conflict.



Photo 4: Nomadic tent in the Chang Tang