

NATURE WATCH

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AROUND ASIA

VIETNAM

STUDYING LEAF MONKEYS

INDIA

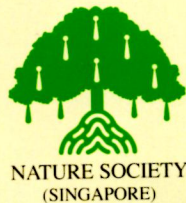
**THE END OF
DANCING SLOTH BEARS**

NEPAL

RAPTOR-OUS WATCH



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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

It's hard not to chuckle at the sight of this edition's beautiful cover creatures – an adult male and a juvenile Tonkin Snub-Nosed Monkey (*Rhinopithecus avunculus*) – photographed by Dr Le Khac Quyet. If there were supermodels in the jungle, they would be these quirky-looking primates, endemic to Vietnam, with their red pouty lips, light blue eye shadow and swaths of creamy white fur against their blackish-brown bodies. These monkeys are also Vietnam's largest non-human primates. Their status – thought to be extinct until they were rediscovered in 1989 – is still far from super: they are listed as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). But leading their comeback are scientists like Quyet, a field biologist and expert in the species, who works with the Center on Collaborative Conservation and Studies of Vietnam's Wildlife (CocoViet).

Quyet confirmed the presence of the species in the Khau Ca forest in Vietnam's Ha Giang province in early January 2002, after spending 10 days searching for them. This discovery extended the known distribution range and global population size of these monkeys. Through conservation efforts supported by various stakeholders who include Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), the estimated population of 50 to 60 individuals at Khau Ca has increased to approximately 130 – the only known viable population of this species on earth at the moment, Quyet tells *Nature Watch*.

Also contributing to the conservation of the Tonkin Snub-nosed Monkey is our Singapore primatologist, Dr Andie Ang, who needs no introduction for her work on the local Raffles' Banded Langur (*Presbytis femoralis*). In this issue, Andie gives us a taste of her fieldwork in Vietnam, where she studied the Tonkin Snub-nosed Monkey and some of its leaf-eating cousins for her Phd.

Another story in this issue involving conservation is focused on the termite-eating, tiger-brawling Sloth Bears (*Melursus ursinus*) in India. Thomas Sharp shares the success story of how the organisation Wildlife SOS worked with the Kalandar community to end the centuries-old practice of provoking Sloth Bears to dance. The dance may have ended, but their work has not, with bears still under threat from habitat loss and illegal trade.

Our third story is from NSS's international raptor coordinator and regular *Nature Watch* contributor Tan Gim Cheong. He takes us on his trip to Nepal, where sitting comfortably with a hot coffee in hand, he watched his beloved birds of prey against the stunning backdrop of the Annapura mountains.

We hope you are sitting comfortably wherever you are. Enjoy this issue.

GEMMA KOH and MARGIE HALL

October 2017

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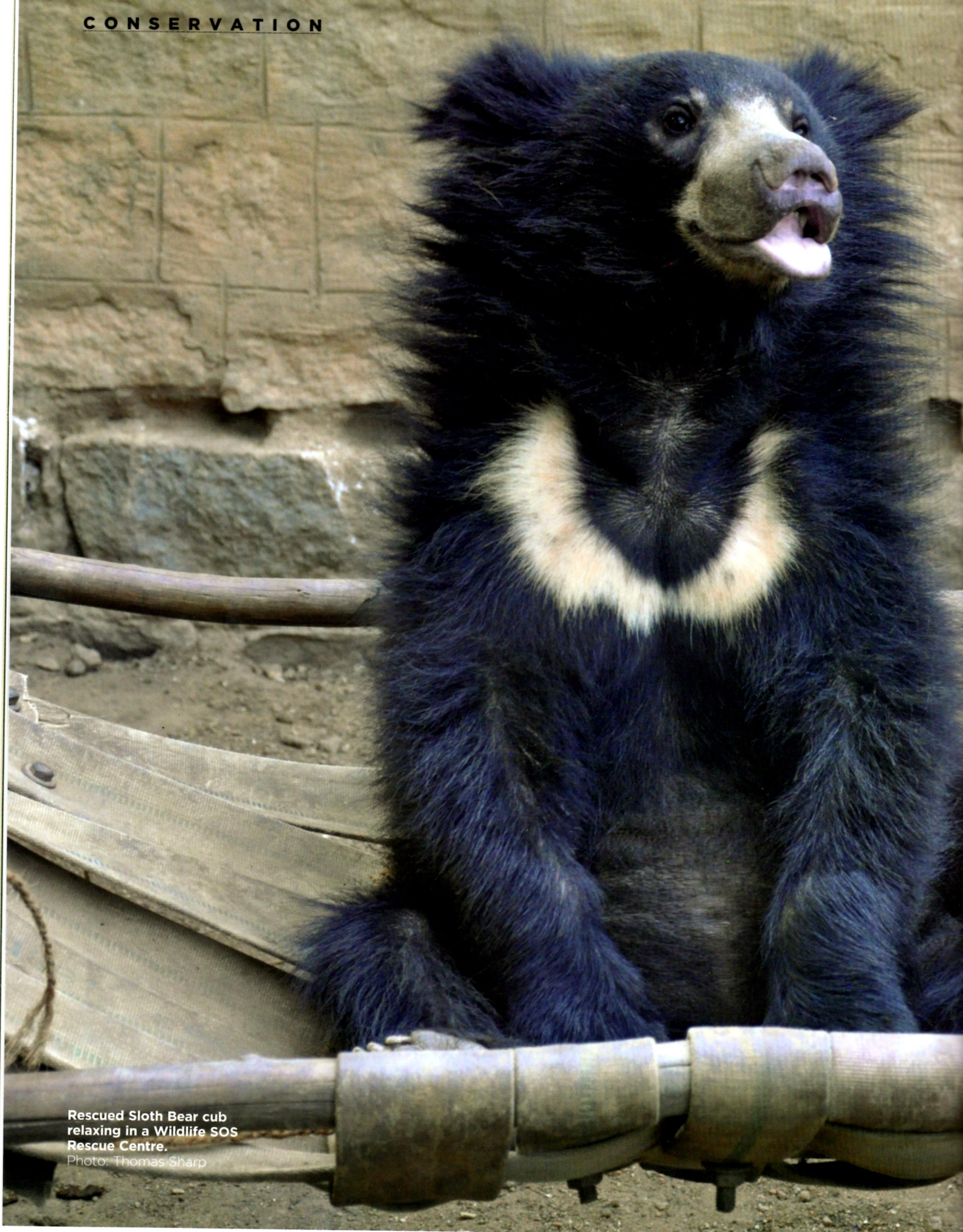
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ON THE COVER Photo by Le Khac Quyet

Adult male and juvenile Tonkin Snub-Nosed Monkeys (*Rhinopithecus avunculus*). In the adult's mouth is an unripe fruit of *Garcinia* sp.



Rescued Sloth Bear cub
relaxing in a Wildlife SOS
Rescue Centre.
Photo: Thomas Sharp

India's Bear Necessity

Sloth Bears may eat termites and brawl with tigers. But they still need protection. **Thomas Sharp** shares the little that is known about India's *Melursus ursinus* and the threats they face. He also reveals how the organisation Wildlife SOS worked to end the centuries-old practice of provoking them to dance.

Photos by **Thomas Sharp, Wildlife SOS, Aditya "Dicky" Singh, Mradul Pathak** and **Jon Dunn**

India is the only country besides China lucky enough to have four bear species: Sloth Bears (*Melursus ursinus*), Asiatic Black Bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), Sun Bears (*Helarctos malayanus*), and Brown Bears (*Ursus arctos*). But only one of these seems particularly synonymous with India: the Sloth Bear.

For starters, the other three species only inhabit the northern portions of India, but the Sloth Bear is present throughout most of the country. In fact, India comprises roughly 90 per cent of the Sloth Bear's current range. Only two other countries – Nepal and Sri Lanka – have healthy populations of Sloth Bears. The species barely ranges into Bhutan, and has recently been completely extirpated from Bangladesh.

Surprisingly little is known about this particular bear species. We do know that they have a specialised diet, over 50 per cent of which is composed of termites and ants – a dietary trait known as myrmecophagy. As a result, Sloth Bears have developed several traits to become more efficient at feeding on these insects: long claws for digging into termite mounds as well as protrusible (extendable) lips and the absence of two middle incisors that allow the bear to suck termites out of the mound more efficiently. The rest of their diet varies greatly but is generally made up of fruits, other parts of plants, and honey. They will even occasionally scavenge carcasses.

Sloth Bears are the most nocturnal of all bear species – perhaps one of the reasons that relatively little is known about them. But females with cubs are often active in the early

Why are they called Sloth Bears?



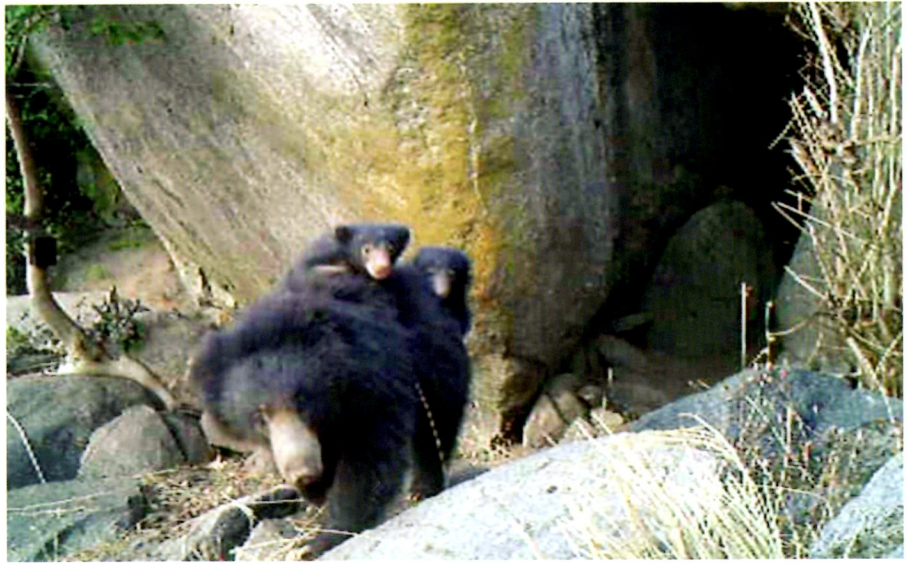
Photo: Thomas Sharp

■ The name "Sloth Bear" was likely derived from when zoologist **George Shaw** made one of the first scientific descriptions of the species in 1791. Shaw recognised that sloth bears lack the **first upper incisors** just like actual sloths, so he mistakenly believed he was looking at a bear-like sloth, not an actual bear. It also appears that the sloth bear's **long claws** added to its overall sloth-like appearance, further convincing Shaw that he was dealing with a type of sloth.

morning or early evening. Females carry their young on their back for up to nine months. This behaviour probably evolved as a measure to protect cubs against potential predators, although it is interesting to note that other myrmecophagous mammals such as anteaters exhibit the same behaviour. Sloth Bears generally have the smallest home ranges of any bear species – a trait likely associated with myrmecophagy.

Sloth Bears are considered one of the most feared animals in the Indian jungle. And these jungles are teeming with potentially dangerous species, including Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), Leopards (*Panthera pardus*), Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*), and King Cobras (*Ophiophagus hannah*). Many local inhabitants consider Sloth Bears unpredictable and aggressive. This behaviour is likely to have evolved from contending with threats posed by other species – mainly tigers – in the Indian jungles.

While the Sloth Bear loses two of its interior incisors at an early age,



Camera-trap photo of a mother carrying two cubs on her back. Photo: Wildlife SOS

Sloth Bears are considered one of the most feared animals in the Indian jungle. And these jungles are teeming with potentially dangerous species, including Bengal Tigers.



Sloth Bear/tiger interaction. Photo: Aditya "Dicky" Singh

Ending the Dance

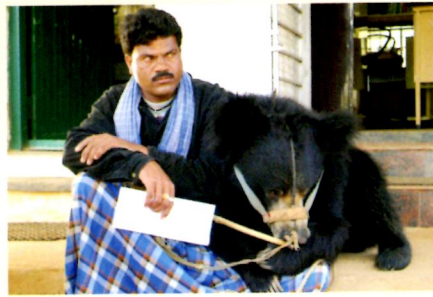
Though technically illegal in India since 1972, the practice of dancing bears was a sub-cultural tradition for roughly 1,200 years. Here's how Wildlife SOS and its partners worked to end the practice.

The practice of dancing bears was traditionally done for the paid entertainment of *mughals* (wealthy, powerful people), but was more recently employed for the amusement of commoners and tourists.

Regardless, there was never really any dancing involved: The bears were simply reacting to the infliction of physical pain. Human handlers administered pain via a short rope leashed through a laceration of the bear's muzzle. Tugging or yanking this crude leash would result in reactions that practitioners called dancing.

These bears often suffered other cruelties, such as having their canine teeth knocked out, to ensure compliance. Welfare of these individual bears aside, the practice's conservation implications were very serious: Not only were cubs being poached from the wild to sustain bear dancing, their mothers were often killed in the process.

By 1995, roughly 1,200 bears were being danced on the streets for money. That is the year **Wildlife SOS** (WSOS) founders Kartick Satyanarayan and Geeta Seshamani decided to address the problem.



Kalandar man turning over his bear to Wildlife SOS in 2009. This was actually the last bear to be turned over to Wildlife SOS. Photo: Jon Dunn

They have been economically dependent on the dancing bear practice for several hundred years. WSOS worked with the Kalandar community to establish alternate and more sustainable livelihood options.

Their organisation started by partnering with other groups, such as **Free the Bears** and **International Animal Rescue**, as well as the **government of India**, to work directly with the **Kalandar community** (the group

largely involved with the dancing bear trade). The Kalandars are extremely poor and have traditionally had few options for feeding their families.

They have been economically dependent on the dancing bear practice for several hundred years. WSOS worked with the Kalandar community to establish alternate and more sustainable livelihood options such as carpet weaving or powdering/packaging spices for the women, and professional driving or running food stands for men. Providing education, training, and equipment has been key in supplanting the group's long-standing dependence on animal exploitation.

In exchange for these new opportunities, the Kalandars gave up their bears, which were then relocated to WSOS sanctuaries where the animals could be rehabilitated and live out their lives in comfort. Through this strategy, WSOS and its partners effectively eradicated the centuries-old dancing bear practice from India in 2009.

WSOS currently operates four Sloth Bear sanctuaries. The two largest sanctuaries, in Agra and Bangalore, house roughly 200 bears and 80 bears, respectively.

All four sanctuaries provide the bears with access to large socialisation areas where they can interact with other bears.

WSOS has a dedicated team of wildlife veterinary doctors and specialised bear keepers to care for these animals. Medical facilities at the sanctuaries are stocked with essential equipment to keep the bears healthy and meet any needs that arise.

The Agra Bear Rescue Facility created a special cub-weaning area dedicated to raising Sloth Bear cubs who need a great deal of attention to help them through the crucial early months of their lives.

Although most bears housed at WSOS sanctuaries come from the dancing bear trade, an increasing number are coming in as a result of human-bear conflicts. Unfortunately, such conflicts, which pose a conservation threat, appear to be on the rise.



Geeta Seshamani with a rescued Sloth Bear cub. Photo: Wildlife SOS



Bears lining up at their dens to be fed at the Agra Bear Rescue Centre. Photo: Mradul Pathak

its canines are the largest (compared to body size) of any bear species. Considering that they seldom eat meat, it is likely that the canines' primary use is defensive in nature. They certainly can be ferocious when surprised, when protecting cubs or when any perceived threat is involved. Sloth Bears will often charge at the adversary if they feel they are unable to flee.

Sloth Bears have been known to brawl with tigers – and survive. Wildlife photographer Aditya “Dicky” Singh captured a series of incredible photographs showing a mother Sloth Bear, with two cubs on her back, who wandered into the proximity of a male and female tiger. The mother bear charged at both tigers separately and the tigers backed off. Although tigers will sometimes kill and eat Sloth Bears, some of the encounters end with the tiger deciding the bear is just too much trouble and allowing the bear to wander off.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) currently lists the Sloth Bear as vulnerable to extinction on its Red List of Threatened Species. Although Sloth Bears can occur at high densities in the wild compared to other bear species, there are few reliable estimates; current Sloth Bear population totals in India and across their range are not known. In fact, what actually constitutes the Sloth Bear's occupied range is still being refined. One thing is certain, however: The Sloth Bear has disappeared from many areas where it once was present, and the known occupied range is shrinking at an alarming rate.




Wildlife SOS sign at the Bannerghatta Bear Rescue Centre. Photo: Thomas Sharp

The Sloth Bear has disappeared from many areas where it once was present, and the known occupied range is shrinking at an alarming rate.



Kartick Satyanarayan with rescued Sloth Bear cubs. Photo: Wildlife SOS



Sloth Bear cub climbing a tree at a Wildlife SOS Rescue Centre.
Photo: Thomas Sharp

Habitat Loss and Illegal Trade

While the traditional dancing bear practice has recently ended, there are still long-running threats to the Sloth Bear.

Habitat loss is likely the biggest threat facing Sloth Bears on a species level. Although these bears can survive in small degraded areas that other species of their size cannot, doing so leads to more contact with humans. And that can lead to mortality. These conflicts can stem from relatively minor annoyances such as raiding a farmer's peanut crops to serious issues like physical attacks on humans that can seriously injure or even kill.

Like most mammals, Sloth Bears prefer to remain undetected. However, if they are surprised – or worse, surprised with cubs – these animals can become extremely defensive and aggressive. Predictably, local inhabitants have little patience for an animal they consider a potentially mortal threat to them or their families.

It is common for Sloth Bears to be killed in retaliation for an attack, or even as a preemptive measure. WSOS researchers are

currently developing a behavioral approach to a safety plan that aims to promote a higher degree of human and Sloth Bear coexistence – and ultimately promote protection for both bears and people. The plan will outline the best ways to avoid chance encounters with Sloth Bears – and, if an encounter does occur, the best ways to avoid serious injury or even death.

Another serious conservation issue facing Sloth Bears is the national and international illegal trade in their body parts. In India, Sloth Bear parts are sold for various reasons. Male reproductive organs are said to be aphrodisiacs; bones, teeth, and claws are thought to ward off evil spirits; and bear fat is employed as native medicine and for hair regeneration.

Although the current extent of international trade in Sloth Bear parts is uncertain, it appears to be much smaller than that for the Asiatic Black Bears or the Sun Bear.

Despite the very real challenges (see box) that Sloth Bears face, they also have a lot going for them:

- Having a small home range means that theoretically a larger population can be present in a smaller area, which translates to better population viability.
- Being myrmecophagous means that food is usually available even in areas that may be relatively degraded.
- Being nocturnal is also a benefit, reducing the likelihood of human-bear conflicts (even though they still occur).
- Lastly, although the tiger may be the Sloth Bear's mortal enemy, and the Asian Elephant is not fond of them either, the Sloth Bear range overlaps with these two species. That means the Indian habitat saved and protected for elephants and tigers will also serve the Sloth Bear.

This incredibly unique bear is like no other animal found in the jungle. Their evolutionary strategies have served them well. However, like most wild animals, they face new challenges as human populations expand. Although the Sloth Bear habitat continues to shrink and human-bear conflict continues to rise, Sloth Bears show a high level of resilience. With a little help from local governments and non-profit groups like WSOS, they will continue to thrive. 🌱

*Wildlife ecologist **Thomas Sharp** is a member of the IUCN Sloth Bear expert team. He has been working with Wildlife SOS's USA branch since its inception more than 10 years ago. In 2016, he took a full-time position as its Director of Conservation and Research. His research on Sloth Bears, Asiatic Black Bears and Sun Bears has focused on human-bear conflict, bear behaviour, maternal denning and biogeography. He has recently been conducting research in India, Bhutan and Laos.*
