

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

This bile business...

Please don't turn the page when you read the next three words: bear-bile farming. We all know that it's barbaric, so the temptation is to shy away from all the gory details.

But we're about to reach a tipping point, and there's a good chance that it can be stopped. So, please, read on.

First, some background. It's estimated that there could be more than 10,000 Asiatic black, or moon, bears in about 100 farms in China alone, and there are more elsewhere in Asia. They are kept in tiny 'crush cages' in which they are unable to stand upright or, in some cases, even move.

Bears are milked once or twice a day: a permanent hole is drilled into their abdomens and gall bladders, then metal tubes are poked into the holes, and the bile is allowed to flow out drip by drip. Holes often become badly infected, while bile leaking into the abdomen can cause peritonitis and lead to an agonising death.

The bile has a number of medicinal applications in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam – yet it can also be a serious health risk to end consumers. One of Vietnam's top traditional medicine practitioners has warned that people who take bile risk contracting fatal liver and kidney diseases.

It makes you wonder why people bother when there are synthetic substances that are just as effective.

So why are we reaching a tipping point? Well, thanks to the work of organisations such as Animals Asia, attitudes are changing. "China's public is waking up to the cruelty [of bear farms]," says founder Jill Robinson.

True, elsewhere it is more of a struggle – in Vietnam, its Bear Rescue



Waxing not waning: a rescued moon bear.

“Bears are kept in tiny 'crush cages', unable to stand upright or, in some cases, even move.”

Centre may be closed down, and 104 bears face an uncertain future. Working in conservation is often like this: one step forward, one step back. That's why it's so important we support those groups that are fighting to end this bile business.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.