

# MALAYAN SUN BEAR



notes

ADELAIDE ZOO  
EDUCATION SERVICE

ZOO

The Adelaide Zoo's South East Asian Rainforest is home to Akbar (meaning 'great one') and Dewi (meaning 'Goddess'), two Malayan Sun bears (*Helarctus malayanus*). These animals were taken illegally from the wild when they were young and kept as pets in Thailand. Being kept in small cages means they were not able to develop normally as cubs which explains some of the bears' unnatural pacing behaviour. Fortunately they were rescued and donated to the Adelaide Zoo by the Taiping Zoo in Malaysia. They arrived at the Adelaide Zoo in November 1994.

The Sun bear's coat is usually black or brown with a whitish or orange breast marking resembling a rising sun and is the origin of the animal's name.

The major difference between the male and female is the male's larger size. Also, Akbar has a very wrinkled forehead and his breast marking is speckled and smaller than Dewi's.

In the wild the Sun bear inhabits dense tropical and sub tropical rainforests of all elevations in South East Asia. Their enclosure at the Adelaide Zoo has been carefully constructed to resemble these conditions. The curator, keeper, maintenance and horticultural staff undertook research to design Akbar and Dewi's enclosure. A pond has been established with continuously flowing water in which they can often be seen during hot weather. They spend their evening in their night quarters, which includes heated indoor

facilities, an outside area with a small pond, branches to climb and behavioural enrichment devices such as old branches, rope balls and tyres.

Sun bears are expert climbers. They climb trees by spreading their forelegs wide and using their long 7.5-cm claws to dig into the trunk. The pads of the bear's feet are bare which also helps with climbing. As the Sun bear is a nocturnal animal (active at night) the majority of the day is spent sleeping and sunbathing in a nest, which it constructs in a fork of a tree by lying on its stomach and scooping in twigs and leaves to make the nest comfortable.

The Malayan Sun bear is one of the only bears that does not hibernate, and although it is the smallest of the bears it can still reach 1.5 metres in length and weigh up to 70 kg. Sun bears can live up to 30 years in captivity.

The Sun bear is classed as an omnivore (plant and meat eater). In the wild its diet consists of fruits, termites and other insects, coconut palm, small mammals and birds. The long claws are used to rip bark from, and tear open trees. The long tongue allows the bear to lick up insects and wild honey from tree crevices and hollows. The Adelaide Zoo provides dietary requirements in the form of various tropical fruits, lean meat, dried fruit and nuts, live insects and primate cake. Primate cake is made from a powder of ground up insects and pureed fruit and vegetables and ensures the bears receive a basic vitamin and mineral intake.

All of these foods are hidden throughout the exhibit amongst leaf litter, bark and trees, which encourages the bear to forage for food as it would do in the wild.

Sun bears have an excellent sense of smell, so finding the hidden food is no problem. The bears

have been known to find watermelons buried under 30cms of dirt.

Akbar and Dewi can be quite destructive and because of their habit of ripping trees apart, the exhibit branches often need replacing and electric wiring protects some living trees. The wiring protects the tree until it matures and becomes capable of withstanding the actions of the bears, after which the wiring is removed.

Births are non-seasonal and the gestation period is around 95 days. One or two young are born in a secluded shelter on the ground and weigh approximately 325 grams each. They are born blind, deaf (hearing is gained within 6 weeks) and hairless. It takes two months before the young can walk and they will remain with their mother until maturity at about 3 years of age. The male does not participate in the rearing of the young so in the event of a captive birth the Zoo would separate the pair before the birth.

The outwardly cautious nature of this animal hides the fact it can be extremely dangerous and can run amazingly fast. Sun bears are short tempered and become particularly aggressive when approached by humans, their only predator. Upon encountering a threat the bear will stand up on its hind legs and may inflict severe wounds with its long and powerful claws and sharp teeth.

Malayan Sun bears are poached for their coats, meat and body parts (for use in so-called medicines and aphrodisiacs) and are exploited for the pet and restaurant trade. These factors, along with significant habitat destruction, have lead to this animal being listed as a Threatened Species.

