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C A F E

Lab discovery may help stop bear poaching

ASHLAND (AP) — A test developed at the nation's wildlife crime lab to identify bear gallbladders will be used to crack down on poachers, wildlife agents say.

"The test is of national importance," said Ed Espinoza, senior forensics specialist at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory. "It's got fish and wildlife people all over the country talking."

Biologists in British Columbia and the western United States are worried that poachers are putting a strain on black bear populations to feed the demand in Asia for a popular home remedy made from the animal's gallbladders.

Espinoza and forensics technician Jo Ann Shafer took extracts of more than 1,000 gallbladders from bears and other animals and ran them through a high-performance liquid chromatograph, which identifies the various chemicals in a sample. They were able to come up with a signature for the bile acids found in bear galls.

Dried gallbladders are ground into a powder believed in Asia to cure a variety of ills as well as serve as a tonic. It is popular in China, Japan, North and South Korea, and Thailand.

A poacher in the United States can get between \$40 and \$80 for a bear gallbladder, but by the time it is sold several times and reaches Asia, the price rises astronomically, said Dave McMullen. McMullen is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's assistant regional director for law enforcement in Portland.

"They tell me if you send the whole carcass, you can really get some money for them, in excess of \$1,000," he said.

That demand has fueled poaching in the United States and Canada.

"One of the problems we had in the past has been identifying positively that a gall for sale is in fact a bear gall," said McMullen. "They always advertise as bear galls. But there are a lot of similarities between bear galls and other galls, particularly pig."

In the past, experts testifying in court had to rely on physical characteristics of a gall bladder and could only testify that they believed a particular sample came from a bear, McMullen said.

"It does obviously make a better case in court if we can say with absolute certainty this gall came from a bear," he said.

The test will keep investigators from running down blind alleys, he added.

"Somebody might come to us and allege that so-and-so is selling bear galls," McMullen said. "What we can do is maybe buy one or two and see if they really are dealing in bear galls."

Espinoza and Shafer's research found that outside Canada, the vast majority of gallbladders alleged to come from bears actually don't. Of the gallbladders seized in the United States, only 16 percent were genuine. Of those from Hong Kong and Malaysia, only 3 percent were real. But in Canada, 98 percent were from bears.

Espinoza said that indicates bear poaching is much more of a problem in Canada than in the United States.

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