

# Human-Bear Conflicts

## The Sloth Bear of Mysore: A Really Rogue Bear, a Typical Sloth Bear, or Several Different Bears?

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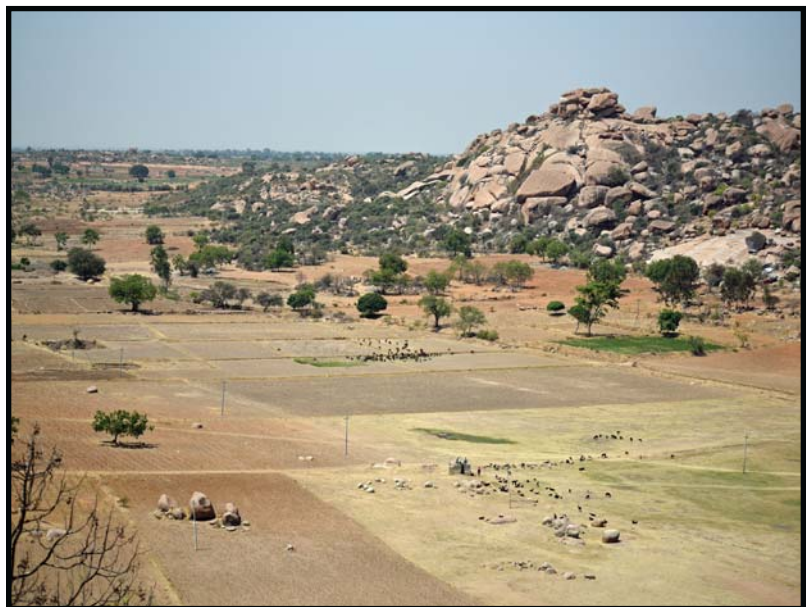
Sixty years ago, Kenneth Anderson (1957) published the story “Alam Bux and the Big Black Bear” in his book *Man-Eaters and Jungle Killers*. The bear at the story’s center has become infamous as the Sloth Bear of Mysore, and appears on Internet top 10 lists of the “greatest animal serial killers.” This bear supposedly killed at least 12 people and mauled more than 24 others near Mysore in the state of Karnataka, southern India. Rereading the story more than a half century later, what can we now ascertain? What insights does the story offer about sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*) attacks? And do the last 60 years of sloth bear research shed any more light on these events?

Anderson wrote that sloth bears “are excitable, unreliable and bad tempered animals,” a view still widely held today by both local people as well as sloth bear biologists. Yet he also appeared to have a true affection for this species: “As I have mentioned somewhere else, Bruin is an old friend of mine, against whom I have no antipathy. I was therefore most disinclined to go after him.” Anderson’s writing makes clear that he was both fond of and knowledgeable about sloth bears and their ecology. His writing is filled with the details of a sloth bear’s life, including their diet, daily lifecycle, activities like crop raiding (though he does not use this term) ground nuts (peanuts), and, of course, attacks.

Anderson set the stage for the story by stating that sloth bears “have a reputation for attacking people without apparent reason, provided that person happens to pass too close, either while the bear is asleep or feeding, or just ambling along.” He later described how a sloth bear attacks a victim. Recounting one specific event (but saying it was emblematic of all sloth bear attacks), he wrote that the bear “invariably attacked the face of the victim, which he commenced to tear apart with his tremendously long and powerful claws, in addition to biting viciously.” However, Anderson also made it clear that for the most part, sloth bears are generally “vegetarian”, meaning not carnivorous, eating almost exclusively fruits, vegetables, and insects or insect products such as honey. Anderson also mentioned that these bears eat carrion, and he thought that reports of the Sloth Bear of Mysore partially eating its victims were at least plausible — in fact, sloth bears partially eating their victims has been documented as recently as 2005 (Bargali et. al. 2005).

The bear encounters that Anderson described were apparently brought about by a food source that lured the bear into the human domain. Anderson wrote specifically about figs, which lined the road to the shrine where his friend’s son was killed. He also mentioned ground-nut that was planted behind the same shrine. However, Anderson also commented that this particular bear “would go out of his way to attack people even when he saw them a long distance away,” though he offered no evidence of this claim.

The habitat in which this bear lived — rocky hillocks surrounded by farmlands, which the bears raided on a nightly basis, as Anderson described it — is very similar to the habitat of our Wildlife SOS (WSOS) sloth bear study area in eastern Karnataka. Additionally, Anderson’s description of the bears’ nightly habits seems to describe the vast majority of bears that we observe: “Hungry by sunset he could be seen coming forth from his cave, and, as twilight deepened into nightfall, he would amble down the knoll and come out on the ground-nut fields. Here he would spend a busy night, eating, uprooting and generally shuffling about over a wide area throughout the hours of darkness.... Leisurely he would climb back to his abode, there



Typical open farmland with dwellings surrounded by rocky hillocks occupied by sloth bears in Karnataka, India.

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to spend the hot hours of the day in deep and barely slumber.”

Given the similarities of the famous “Sloth Bear of Mysore” and the many bears that we have seen in eastern Karnataka, it seems fair to ask if all the attacks and deaths were likely from this single bear. And what’s more, could they be ascribed to the bear that Anderson eventually shot and killed? Sloth bear attacks in this hilly habitat were not uncommon then, as Anderson clearly indicated, and they are not uncommon now, as indicated by our study of sloth bear attacks during the last 5 years.

Anderson first hunted the bear where his friend Alam Bux’s son was killed. Having no luck, he returned to Bangalore for a month. Upon hearing of 2 more bear attacks roughly 30 km from the first location, Anderson “concluded that it was the same bear.” However, several things suggest otherwise. First, the 30 km between these 2 attacks is a large distance for a sloth bear: this species may have the smallest home range of any bear species, with study area-specific averages for males spanning just 4–14 km<sup>2</sup> (Joshi et. al. 1995, Ratnayeke et. al. 2007; although Yoganand et al. 2012 suggested ranges could be much larger). Therefore, the distance between attacks would be unlikely to fall within the home range of a single male bear. Also, since sloth bear home ranges can overlap extensively (Joshi et al. 1999), the area in which these 2 attacks occurred was likely inhabited by multiple bears. Supposedly both attacks were by a large male, not a young dispersing animal that could be traveling extensively. Anderson describes the area where the bear was killed, as “wanting for nothing.” If true, then the bear would likely not be searching widely for food or water.

It is impossible to know with certainty whether this was indeed 1 marauding bear. Perhaps there were reasons not explained in the literature that led to the single-bear theory. However, it seems more plausible that several different bears were responsible for the many attacks. It is clear that Mr. Anderson understood sloth bears, but perhaps his determination to rid the area of a problem bear clouded his judgment in this case. Or perhaps he realized that his narrative would not be quite as compelling if the tale was not about a single aberrant bear that was dispatched at the end of the story. Whatever the case, this would not have been the first time, nor obviously the last, that a bear would have been killed to make the public feel safer after an attack or a series of attacks. This happens not just in India, but anywhere where bears or other potentially dangerous wildlife still occur.

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In Karnataka, India, sloth bears typically emerge from rock crevices in the evening and come down from the hillocks to feed at night. They are widely regarded as being prone to attack people

