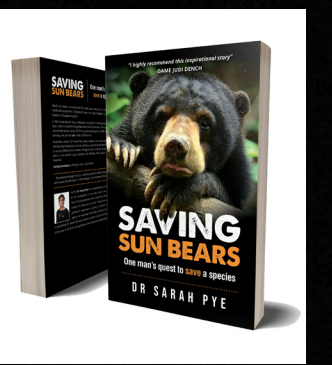




Extending conservation engagement through collaboration between art and science



Introduction

Creative communication of conservation science to the general public has become a pre-requisite for the survival of the human race and its natural environment (Hobbs 1998a, 1998b; Root-Bernstein & Scott 1999). However, the opportunity to influence young people's behavior is often lost the moment visitors exit ex-situ facility gates. Interdisciplinary collaboration between art and science has the capacity to extend engagement. This is illustrated by the work of Dr Wong Siew Te, founder and director of the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre, and Dr Sarah Pye, author of the narrative biography, *Saving Sun Bears*.



Dr Wong Siew Te

Wong, a wildlife biologist who trained in Taiwan and Montana, began studying sun bears in 1998. His pioneering research took him into the most threatened wildlife habitat on Earth, where field work is exceedingly difficult. Wong is the founder and CEO of the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC), the only rescue center of its kind. It houses around 40 rescued sun bears on the edge of the Sepilok-Kibali forest reserve, Sabah, Malaysia and focuses on animal welfare, education, research and rehabilitation. To date, the organisation has rescued over 60 bears and released 10 back into the wild. BSBCC opened to the public in 2014.

The project

In 2012, Pye introduced Wong to the University of the Sunshine Coast which led to a number of projects: Design students developed the interpretive signage at BSBCC, improving visitor engagement; Public relations students designed and launched a sun bear adoption program, improving conservation funding and education and animal ecology students have aided in data analysis. Pye wrote the narrative biography of Dr. Wong as part of her Doctor of Creative Arts degree. *Saving Sun Bears* was published in 2020 and Pye was awarded her degree the same year. It has the potential to extend BSBCC's reach and connect with future conservationists. Not one to rest on her laurels, in 2021 Pye wrote three children's books about Wong's adventures with rainforest species under the *Wildlife Wong* series and designed school workshops around their content. Wong often joins Sarah virtually from Borneo to answer questions. Six more books are planned, with each focusing on a different species. These non-traditional research outputs extend the work of this important conservation organisation.

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The problem

Sun bears are facing extinction partly due to poachers killing them for bear parts, which are used in Chinese medicine. In addition, habitat loss and climate change are affecting the ecology of tropical rainforests and impacting the reproduction cycles of key fruiting species. Without a change in human behavior, and conservation assistance from a wider public, the species is estimated to be extinct in 30 years (Garshelis 2017).

The people



Dr Sarah Pye

Pye holds a Masters in journalism. She was named Sunshine Coast Small Business Woman of the Year in 2010 for the output of her Masters, the guidebook, *Kids Welcome to Queensland* (2009). Her subsequent Doctorate of Creative Arts explored how narratives can be used to engage a non-specialist in conservation. The creative output was the narrative biography of Dr Wong Siew Te. *Saving Sun Bears* was published in 2020. Pye has been published in several journals, authored a book chapter and presented at a number of conferences.

Conclusion

By collaborating with arts experts, scientists have the capacity to extend the reach of their research and conservation activities. The case study between Dr. Pye and Dr. Wong illustrates a range of unique outreach outputs which broaden awareness for BSBCC. This both positively impacts visitor motivation to preserve endangered species long after they leave the facility, and engages a new audience with important conservation themes.

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