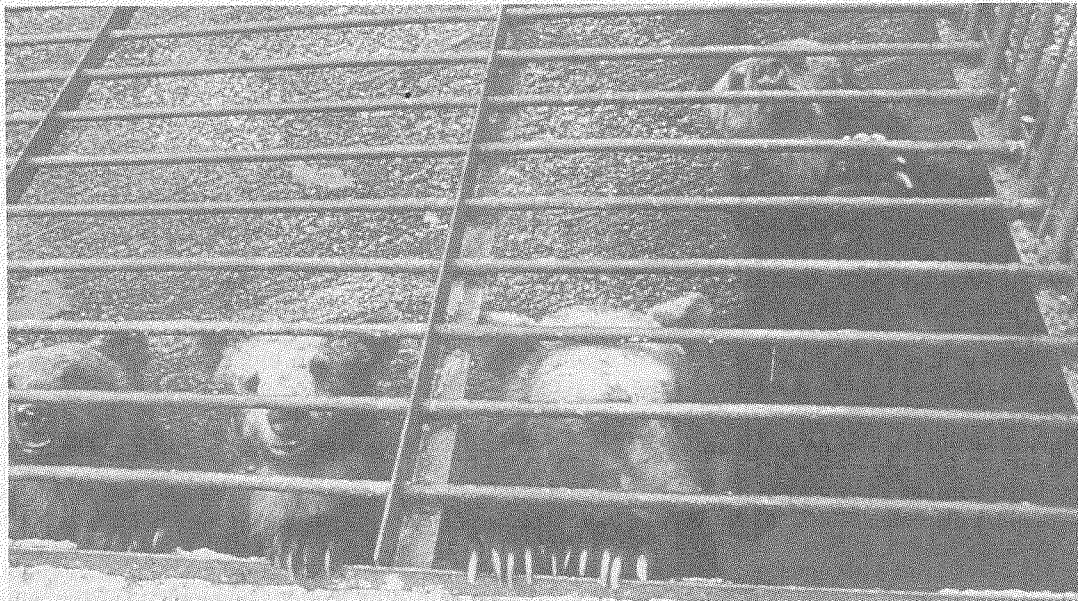


Bear zoos are living hell, group says



BEARS IN A CAGE in a tourist zoo are maltreated, claims the World Society for the Protection of Animals. KYODO PHOTO

An international animal protection group has given Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa a report that alleges abuses at private bear zoos in Japan, environmentalists have disclosed.

The report, from the London-based World Society for the Protection of Animals, demands the government correct what it calls the mistreatment of bears in tourist zoos that are living hells. The report says the bears are confined in cages that are too small.

The society sent its report

to Miyazawa last November, the environmentalists disclosed on the eve of the opening of the Kyoto conference of the Washington Convention on trade in endangered species.

The government told the society it is questioning the zoos and said it would regret it if the accusations prove true, the sources said.

There are currently eight bear zoos in Japan that are operated as sightseeing facilities. The society sent an ecologist to Japan for an on-the-

spot study, the report says.

The eight zoos have bred at least 1,000 bears, the report says. The society's ecologist visited five zoos, three in Hokkaido, one in Akita Prefecture and one in Kumamoto Prefecture.

At one zoo, as many as 22 bears were confined in a cage 1.5 meters wide and 5 meters deep, the report says, without disclosing the name of the facility. The survey calls that zoo a living hell for bears, because a female and her cub died from suffocation in the narrow cage.