

Panthera Tigris: The Continued Crisis

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Last month, while President Clinton was on safari in Jaipur, a team of wildlife experts hired by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) were preparing a report recommending that financial support be “cut-off” to tiger conservation programs in India. According to the report, which will be discussed at the CITES conference in Nairobi next year, India’s wild tiger population, despite millions of dollars in aid, “is being heavily poached by organized and well-funded hunters.” Now Suresh Sharma, the head of the Indian delegation to CITES, says that if funds to India’s wildlife preserves are stopped, the mission that prepared the report will be responsible for “killing” tigers.

This tug-of-war between tiger conservation and the illegal trade industry has been going on for a long time. Though tiger hunting is now illegal everywhere, and international trade in tigers and tiger products is banned under CITES, tigers and tiger parts for decorations or traditional medicines are still available on black markets. Yet the tiger’s shrinking habitat and the dilapidation of its prey are reason enough to believe that little money is actually reaching the field. Home of an estimated 3,500 wild tigers, India has 23 parks and reserves that lack adequate management and resources necessary for successful conservation. Forest guards, most of whom are underpaid or not paid at all, patrol without radios, modern weapons and decent vehicles.

Sadly enough, today the tiger lives in a dangerously limited, fragmented, and insecure world. After five million years of dominating the wilderness, less than 7,000 of these big cats survive in their natural habitat. Indeed, this past century alone has seen a 95 percent population decline of this great species. Sadder still is the truth that man is solely responsible for endangering the tiger. Blame it on gaming, trade, industry, development or whatever, there is no question that the tiger’s decline has been the result of man’s selfish and acquisitive actions. Gone forever are the Bali, Caspian, and Javan tiger—all destroyed through loss of habitat and hunting.

What does this say about our understanding of the environment? At the very least these grim numbers tell us that we have forgotten or ignored our obligation to preserve and protect the natural world. That the legacy of the tiger can serve as a portal to the past and a lesson in survival should not have to be the underlying incentive for pursuing long-term survival strategies. At the heart of the matter lies the need to respect and maintain the interrelated sum of processes we call nature. And, as we have seen or felt at one time or another, nature can act in mysterious and unpredictable ways, suddenly reminding us that the

basis of our existence is frighteningly relative and that, like the tiger (or a grain of sand, for that matter), we too are only passing through.

Perhaps it is too neat and easy to say that to save an animal we must care about him, and to care about him we must know him. Yet because of the tiger's elusive nature, much about it remains a mystery. It is believed that all of the eight subspecies of the tiger originated some five million years ago in the Chigar Caves of Northern Siberia. As the population of the tiger increased, so did the demand for prey and territory. Through the centuries, the tiger moved south and southwest to China, Indochina, Sumatra, Bali, Java, Burma, India, and to the southern edge of the Caspian Sea. With the diversification of environments and prey, the tiger evolved into eight subspecies, with physical distinction in size, coat pattern, and skull shape. The Amur, Chinese, Indo-Chinese, Sumatran, Balinese, Javan, Bengal, and Caspian tigers all adapted to the environments in which they inhabited.

Generally, the proportions of a tiger's body range as follows: head and body length from 4.6 to 9.2 feet, weight from 220 to 660 pounds, and tail from 24–37 inches. The striped pattern of a tiger's coat enables it to hide in environments such as grasslands, savannas, rain forests, mangrove swamps, and rocky outland. With tremendous strength in its legs, shoulders, and teeth, a tiger can bring down an animal twice its size, leap 32 feet and swim up to 18 miles. Yet tigers are careful not to waste their energy; they never move without a purpose. Mostly nocturnal, they are known to rest a large percentage of the day. As a solitary creature, their territory may range from 4 to 1,500 square miles, depending on food supply and habitat. Their favorite food includes deer, cattle, and wild pigs.

The fact that the tiger has adapted to such a diverse range of terrains and temperatures (from 120°F in India to -40°F in Siberia) is an outstanding indication of its capacity for survival. Accordingly, its longevity and prowess contributed to the many myths and legends carried through the oral tradition of ancient cultures who feared and respected this regal creature. Many Asians believe the tiger is the jungle's oldest inhabitant, and just as they address an older person with reverence, avoid calling the big cat by its common name. They call the tiger General, Grandmother of the Forest, Grandfather of the Forest, or Ruler of the Forest. The Kerinci people of Sumatra maintain that tigers befriended their ancestors and accompanied them into the region. They also believe their forebears turned themselves into tigers after death.

Not long before the turn of the 18th century, the mystic, William Blake, wrote a poem called "The Tiger," in which he avowed this majestic beast was immortal because of its enduring and fearless nature and because he believed no god in his right mind would have the courage to create such a cunningly elusive killer:

*When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

These last two stanzas of Blake's poem sing passionately of the tiger's legend and how it brought fear to the forests. In some places, tiger lore created such a revered image of this creature that it became part of the social fabric and order of village life. Even now it is impossible to separate tiger from myth. Ironically, this largest of the world's cats has become the immolation of its own mythical powers.

In times past, people living near forests found ways to coexist with the tiger. Before firearms, mechanized farming and tree leveling, poaching was not an option. Even until the last few centuries human existence has had little influence on the life of the tiger. But through ancient Chinese belief and experiment, this great cat became a commodity valued in folk medicine and poachers began dealing tiger pelts, bones, and organs, in the lucrative black market. This demand resulted in the frequent slaughtering of the Chinese tiger.

At the start of the 20th century there were at least 100,000 tigers roaming the wild. In the early 1900s they were killed for sport. Perhaps the most concentrated period of gaming came during the British raj. During this time, British aristocrats and raja would travel throughout India shooting as many tigers as they could track. Through the gaming industry came the trade and marketing of tiger parts throughout the world. Poachers soon were killing tigers in every region they inhabited. Meanwhile, habitat loss due to deforestation and development began to encroach on the tiger's territory. Consequently, the Balinese tiger disappeared in the early fifties, in 1959 the last of the Caspian tigers was shot, and the Javan tiger became extinct in 1979.

There are currently only an estimated 6,500 tigers left in the wild: between 2,500 and 3,750 Bengal, about 1,500 Indo-Chinese, 500 Sumatran, 470 Amur, and 50 South Chinese. Because tiger products have now reached the global market, tigers are being poached by poison even on protected parks and reserves. Despite the illegal market, the demand and trade in tiger parts continue. The consequence of this demand is that at least one tiger per day is poached.

Over the last twenty-five years the mission of tiger conservation has heightened the world's awareness to the many perils facing this great species. Yet the consequence of black-market demand and the tiger's shrinking habitat have countered the efforts of many organizations and projects advancing its long-term survival. Organizations such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and CITES are now trying to initiate new strategies to protect the tiger. Through a collaborative effort the United States and Russia have been successful at using radio collars to track the Siberian tiger in the wild, and knowledge of the tiger's range and antipoaching efforts have provided a population increase of 72 percent over the last twelve years.

But the battle persists, and evidence tells us it is likely to continue for a long time. Michael Nichols, a photographer for the National Geographic Society who has spent the last twenty years tracking the tiger, agrees that “more money needs to go directly to the reserves for field protection and prey based breeding.” Nichols thinks that instead of spending the bulk of the conservation fund on long-term science and research efforts such as captive breeding, conservationists should focus their energy on breeding prey for wild tigers. “Tigers breed exceptionally well in the wild,” says Nichols. “What's hurting them more than anything is the lack of prey base.” Prey such as wild pigs and sambar are alarmingly scarce in many of the regions that tigers inhabit. Deer populations in India and Asia have all but been decimated through hunting and deforestation.

The tiger of tomorrow depends upon the success of antipoaching efforts and the preservation of vast ecosystems. Over the next three years WWF and WCS will work together to initiate new strategies directed toward tiger conservation. A few of these strategies include rebuilding decimated populations, maintaining an accurate representation of the regions where tigers exist, dealing more effectively with tiger conservation areas straddling international boundaries, and controlling illegal trade. One of their main projects will be identifying the 25 areas in the world where tigers have the best chance for long-term survival. The future programs in these conservation areas will include antipoaching teams, interaction with people living close to the conservation areas, population monitoring, and a comprehensive effort to stop illegal international trade.

Grassroots projects such as agroforestry and antipoaching patrols are immediate areas of conservation in need of support. But improved systems of managing these vast reserves and parks must begin with a genuine interest and understanding of the tiger's well being. Here local participation and enthusiasm for tiger conservation is critical. Conservation groups must consider the local people's daily needs if cooperative conservation is to succeed. This may mean a transformation in native lifestyle. It may mean people plant trees and refrain from shooting deer. What it hopes surely to mean is that this great cat—arguably the most magnificent and mysterious predator ever to roam the earth—will at long last be safe.