



ENVIRONMENTALISTS RAISE ALARM OVER RUSSIA'S SIBERIAN TIGER

by Antoine Blua

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In October, the carcass of a young Siberian tiger was found in Russia's Far East with two bullet holes in its skull. Experts say the animal was most probably shot by hunters in pursuit of illegal prey.

The finding came ahead of the release of a survey indicating that, after a decade of stability, population figures are falling for the Siberian tiger, the world's largest cat.

The annual survey, which covers roughly one-fifth of the tiger's habitat in Russia, found just 56 adult tigers, a 40 percent decrease from the average over the past 12 years.

The survey is conducted by the Siberian Tiger Monitoring Program, a collaboration between the U.S.-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and several Russian organizations.

"The results indicate that tiger numbers appear to be falling in the majority of the monitoring sites, where we have been monitoring for 12 years," says Dale Miquelle, the director of the WCS Russia program, which has observed a four-year decline in tiger track counts.

Miquelle adds that the numbers of some of the tiger's "key prey species are falling as well. We can't tell exactly how many tigers are there now, but numbers are on the decline. Of that we're quite sure."

Miquelle says wildfires and intensive logging of the Korean pine and Mongolian oak have stripped bare much of the tiger's habitat, leaving no food for typical prey like the red deer, roe deer, and wild boar.

Record snowfalls in the northern portions of the tiger's Russian range last year caused a further drop in prey.

Dwindling Habitat

The Siberian tiger, also known as the Amur tiger, is largely found in the Primorsky and Khabarovsk regions in Siberia's Far East.

The last full-range survey, conducted in 2005, indicated that between 428 and 502 Siberian tigers resided on the territory. Miquelle says the animal's population numbers had remained stable for a decade.

"That was one of the few examples around the world where tiger numbers were actually stable," he notes. "In most of the countries, tiger numbers were decreasing, so a lot of people looked at Russia as a success story."

An estimated total of 3,200 tigers, recognizable by their dark stripes overlaying fur that can range from off-white to reddish-orange, today roam Asia's forests, down from hundreds of thousands a century ago.

The big cats, which were once widespread from the Caspian Sea to Indonesia, have completely vanished from western Asia. They remain in just 7 percent of their historical range, which spanned 13 countries in South and East Asia.

Three subspecies, the Javan, Balinese, and Caspian tigers, have already become extinct. Genetic research has shown that the latter was almost identical to the Siberian tiger, raising the possibility that the species could be reintroduced.

Miquelle says the remaining tigers are threatened mainly due to habitat destruction and poaching for lucrative pelts and other body parts used in traditional medicines.

"In comparison to, say, 10 years ago, there's a much greater demand for tiger's skins," Miquelle says. "In the

past, we've always considered the major threat to be the purchase of bones and tiger parts for traditional medicines."

Wildlife experts say a single tiger skin can bring as much as \$10,000 internationally.

International Call For Action

On October 30, an international workshop ended in Kathmandu, Nepal, with a call for immediate action to save the tiger before it disappears from the wild.

Addressing the forum, World Bank President Robert Zoellick said the illegal activities of traders and poachers were "better organized" than those of environmental policymakers and conservationists.

"At present the illegal trade in wildlife is estimated at over \$10 billion across Asia, second only to weapons and drugs smuggling," Zoellick said.

The Kathmandu gathering was the first in a series of meetings that will conclude with a "tiger summit" attended by heads of state in 2010 -- the year of the tiger, according to the Chinese zodiac.

In Russia, scientists and nongovernmental organizations say just 8 percent of the Siberian tiger's habitat is currently protected -- too little to ensure the cat's survival over the long term.

Miquelle says the number of inspectors in the forest is insufficient, while the fine for possession or transport of tiger parts is minimal.

"Right now it's a misdemeanor to be in possession of tiger parts. Theoretically, someone who'd be caught dragging a tiger body out of a forest [and] claim that he found it would get a very minor fine," he says.

Miquelle also urges authorities to impose no-logging edicts for the key tree species providing food for the tiger's prey.

Source:

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