THE CONSERVATION MAGAZINE OF DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

TIGERS IN THE TANK

Can we halt the decline of India's big cats before it's too late?

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WINTER
2009

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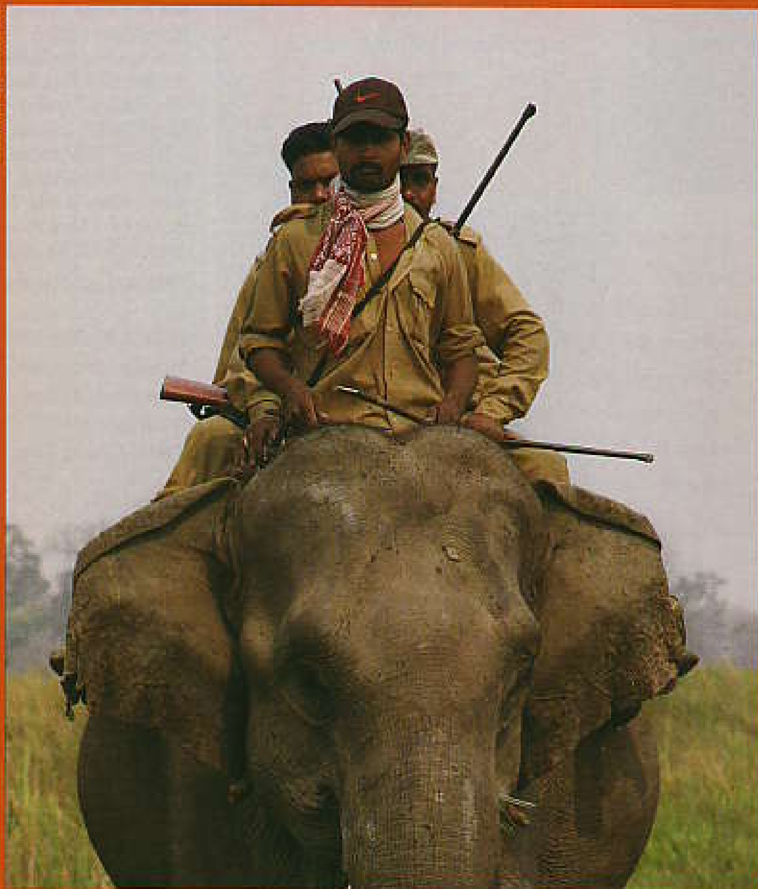

tigers in the tank

BY SHARON GUYNUP

Elephant-riding game wardens (above) keep a watchful eye for poachers in India's Kaziranga National Park. Kaziranga is one of the last bastions for Bengal tigers (right), whose numbers in the country have dropped by 60 percent in just the past six years.

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We stop at Bagori field headquarters, just inside India's Kaziranga National Park in the remote northeast state of Assam. Range officer Pallab Deka jumps into the back of our open Jeep while Sri Bitamber Das, a park guard, grabs his World-War-II-era .303 Smith-Enfield rifle and climbs in front with my driver. We head into the park, the last bastion of the Indian rhinoceros for over a century, bouncing along the rutted dirt track and fishtailing through puddles left by recent downpours. Standing on the seat, gripping the roll bar, I survey the swath of head-high elephant grass that blankets these lush wetlands—the floodplain of the mighty Brahmaputra River—still shrouded in patchy blue mist that swirls from the nearby Karbi Anglong hills.

The abundance and variety of wildlife makes this drive feel like an African safari. A rhino and her calf stand knee-deep in a *beel*—still pond water—chomping lazily on water hyacinth. Another 20 dot the grasslands. Eight elephants lumber along the lake's far shore. Birds too numerous to name flit and fly and call, and deeper in the park, a massive Pallas fishing eagle shrieks from a giant silk cotton tree. A five-foot monitor lizard suns himself in a ditch, and herds of burnished swamp deer flee, frantic, from our intrusion, followed by tiny hog deer and two wild boar.

A sudden commotion explodes nearby in a cacophony of piercing cries and squawks. I glimpse a flash of orange and hear a tortured squeal. Deka whispers "*bagh*," Hindi for tiger. The driver screeches to a halt, kills the engine and we watch a large male Bengal tiger emerge from a wall of grass, panting, and plop along the roadside just 50 feet away. After eyeing us for maybe 10 minutes, he retraces his steps, and we hear another cry, weaker this time, as he strikes. He strides slowly away with a hog deer dangling from his mouth.

Sighting one of the world's six tiger subspecies—the largest of the big cats—is a rare opportunity. All are endangered—but today it is getting harder than ever to see India's tiger, the Royal Bengal. This subspecies ranges from frigid Himalayan forests down through Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar—but most live in India. Kaziranga has provided a safe haven for these tigers when there have been catastrophic losses elsewhere—losses that shocked India and the world when they were made public last year. The Wildlife Institute's grim report on the status of tigers documented a stunning 60 percent drop in tiger numbers from just five years ago: At most 1,411 tigers—perhaps as few as 1,165—still inhabit the country, marking an all-time low. Most Indian states in tiger range have lost at least half of their cats since 2002. Orissa, lying just south of Calcutta on the Bay of Bengal, has lost even more: Just 45 tigers remain out of an estimated 173 six years ago. The

cause: a deadly combination of poaching for the illicit trade for traditional Asian medicine, additional hunting for the tiger skin trade, loss of livable habitat—and disappearing prey.

Belinda Wright, director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India, a group that works with police to investigate wildlife poaching, calls it a serious wakeup call. She and others have been trying to spark action for years. "I hope it will shock state governments into taking action to save our tigers," she says.

It has—at least on paper. Last year, the government announced emergency plans to rescue its national symbol. Eight parks, including Kaziranga, were reclassified as tiger reserves and another four were proposed in May—a move that will, in theory, garner greater financial support and protection for them. New Delhi also earmarked $153 million over the next five years for tiger conservation to increase anti-poaching efforts. Those funds will be used to beef up the ranks of forest guards by hiring retired army officers, to buy new tiger-monitoring equipment, and to pay $25,000 per family to relocate 200,000 villagers outside of tiger sanctuaries.

range, about 40 percent less than they did just a decade ago," says John Seidensticker, a tiger expert and head of the Conservation Ecology Center at the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

Shrinking forests mean that perhaps 60 percent of India's tigers spend at least some part of the year outside reserves, where they end up in the crosshairs. When people and tigers come in contact, both suffer, and tigers often die.

I visit a survivor at the nonprofit Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Kaziranga. A seven-month-old male tiger cub growls and hisses at me as I approach his fenced enclosure with the centre's veterinarian, Anjan Talukdar, who tells me the cub's story. Last December, a worker at the nearby Hatikuli Tea Estate saw something moving under tea bushes. He discovered this cub writhing in convulsions beside his dead sister. A dead cow lay nearby, the same animal that the cubs' mother had taken down two days before. Its owner had retaliated by stealing pesticide from the plantation and stuffing the carcass with the poison—which the cats had eaten. There was no sign

The tiger was relentlessly pursued for centuries by trophy hunters (below right, the Prince of Wales' 1875 hunting party) and others. Starting in the 1970s, new laws and reserves (sign at Kaziranga, below left) helped boost tiger numbers for a time, but conservation efforts foundered—jeopardizing the survival of animals like this mother and cubs at Bandhavgarh National Park (left).

But it will take more than promised funding to save the tiger. For example, relocating 200,000 villagers is a start, but it's just a fraction of the 3 million that currently live inside India's wildlife preserves. And these isolated, protected "islands" are hemmed in by an exploding population, with about 4 million people living on the periphery, says Joanna Van Gruisen, who studies tigers in Panna Tiger Reserve. That wave of humanity is stripping away buffer zones and wildlife corridors, felling every tree and grabbing every possible scrap of tillable, grazeable land to survive. So tigers continue to lose habitat, and there's less for them to eat. "Tigers occupy only 7 percent of their historical

of the tigress, and the cub was taken to the center to recuperate. I ask what will become of him. "When he gets bigger, he'll be transferred to a captive-breeding program at the Bhopal zoo," says Talukdar. "Indian law prohibits his return to the wild."

At the close of the 19th century, when Rudyard Kipling penned the *Jungle Book*, between 40,000 and 50,000 tigers roamed the Indian subcontinent. For centuries, *Panthera tigris* has been the ultimate trophy, relentlessly hunted by both royalty and *sahibs*. Shooting a tiger was a coming-of-age ritual for princes, while Rewa kings in central India thought it auspicious to slay 109 tigers once they ascended the throne. Under

India's wild tigers, such as this one crossing a road in Bandhavgarh National Park (above), are a major draw for tourists. But they are also tempting targets for poachers, with skins (confiscated samples, below) fetching as much as $20,000.

the British Raj, tigers were systematically slaughtered as pests. Post-independence, anyone with a gun joined the free-for-all, and then tiger-skin coats became a hot fashion item in the West. By 1971, a census counted just 1,826 tigers left alive.

Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stepped in to save the big cat that she loved, launching Project Tiger, one of the world's most ambitious conservation initiatives. She established nine reserves, protecting 6,332 square miles, hired guards to patrol them and forcibly moved whole villages outside their perimeters. Strict new wildlife protection laws banned the shooting of tigers and other rare animals—or their sale. Within 15 years, tiger numbers topped 4,000, and India was recognized for creating a global model for wildlife conservation.

But political will waned after Indira's son, Rajiv Gandhi, was voted out of office in 1989. Economic growth took precedence, and a tidal wave of development sidestepped environmental regulations. Forests were razed, degraded, submerged beneath dam floodwaters, pillaged by mining projects and converted for industry and agriculture.

Project Tiger foundered. In a 2006 report, an Indian auditor found the project riddled with corruption and neglect, with minimal funds often skimmed by state governments for other purposes. As forest guards quit or retired they were not replaced, and those that remained were in great danger when on

patrol: Armed with antique rifles that often failed to fire, they were outgunned by poachers with semi-automatic weapons and Russian-made night-vision glasses.

Over a decade ago, the demand for tiger products used in traditional Chinese medicine skyrocketed as globalization funneled unprecedented wealth to China. Nearly all parts of the cat—the eyes, whiskers, genitals, tail and more—have been prescribed for their supposed medicinal and aphrodisiac powers for more than 1,500 years. Tiger remedies have been used to treat everything from epilepsy, toothaches, flagging libido and skin

SAVING TIGERS, PROTECTING FORESTS

To save tigers–and to stop global warming–Defenders' international program is urging Congress and the new administration to protect tropical forests from illegal logging and other degradation. The tropical forests of southeast Asia cover approximately 6.8 million square miles and not only provide crucial habitat for tigers, orangutans and other imperiled species, but also soak up and store a portion of the estimated 428 billion tons of carbon dioxide absorbed globally by tropical forests each year.

To help reduce levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere–a potent "greenhouse gas"–Defenders supports the enactment of federal "cap-and-trade" legislation. Such legislation would set a declining annual cap on carbon emissions and then allow emitters to trade emission-reduction credits to stay under the limit. Under this plan, polluters could meet their pollution-reduction targets by paying countries to protect their tropical forests–forest which would likely be cut down otherwise. Creating such a financial incentive for forest conservation not only benefits the world's climate but also helps endangered forest species.

For more information, please visit **www.defenders.org/international**.

diseases to laziness and pimples. The bones are highly valued, ground into powder to treat pain, inflammation and headaches. "Tiger bone wine," made by soaking a tiger carcass in rice wine, is ingested regularly as a tonic to imbue the drinker with the cat's great strength—and is gaining in popularity.

A study published in July showed that 43 percent of Chinese citizens questioned admitted to consuming products containing tiger parts—and 71 percent of them preferred products made from wild tigers to those from farmed tigers.

Tiger skins and other parts, especially claws and teeth, are also prized as trophies, charms and souvenirs. Some guess that skins fetch between $10,000 and $20,000. A 2004 study by the National Science Foundation valued powdered tiger bone at $1,450 a pound.

To meet this growing demand, tigers were poisoned, shot and snared across India in great numbers. International trade in endangered wildlife—including the Bengal tiger—is banned under a treaty and has been illegal in China since 1993, driving the sale of smuggled wildlife underground. "Poaching became criminally organized around 1999," says Wright. A thriving black-market trade run by international crime syndicates now routes tiger contraband overland through Nepal and Tibet to China. Interpol, in a March 2008 statement to Congress, linked the trade with organized crime's illicit gun and drug trafficking activities.

Wright, along with a number of wildlife biologists, noted the disappearing tigers and alerted officials, and the August 1993 seizure of 882 pounds of tiger bone in Delhi provided some clue as to where the cats were going. But officials ignored the situation, clinging to inflated estimates based on flawed data estimating tiger populations from paw prints.

Conservationists have accused forest officials of lying about tiger numbers to protect the lucrative tourist safari trade. Populations were sinking within all 28 tiger reserves, and the scandal finally came to light in 2005. The government had claimed that 18 tigers roamed Sariska Tiger Reserve, near Delhi, but studies found that not one remained: Poachers had killed every last tiger. The embarrassed government dissolved Project Tiger and created the new National Tiger Conservation Authority in its stead, mandating effective tiger conservation. They also formed a new Wildlife Crime Control Bureau to go after poachers, but two years later, they have not yet investigated a single poaching case. Over the past decade, India has seized the bones and skins of more than 800 tigers, and over the same period there have been just two convictions for tiger poaching, says Van Gruisen, "And they are still disappearing."

Bringing back the tiger will also mean preserving habitat. In March, the National Tiger Conservation Authority announced plans to restore forested buffer zones around national parks and to build green corridors allowing tigers to move between protected sanctuaries. Hopefully, in combination with the 12 new tiger reserves, these protections will give the cats room to breed and hunt. "There is still time to act," says Wright. "India has done it before and can do it again."

India is home to at least half of the world's remaining Bengal tigers, and the good news is that with proper protection, there is hope for them there. But, says Deborah Banks, biologist with the Great Britain-based Environmental Investigation Agency, "Just creating reserves is not a magic wand: We still need people, resources and the political will to protect them." She adds that reserves will need established intelligence networks and adequate protection forces. Most tiger reserves lack armed guards and the basic infrastructure and equipment needed to combat poaching.

Here in the grasslands of Kaziranga, 435 deeply committed rangers put themselves on the line every day to protect tigers and other wildlife from poachers. "My men and I will do anything to protect the animals in our care," says Range Officer Deka. "The only way to deter poachers is to let them know that we carry guns, and if they step into my park—there will be serious consequences."

Sharon Guynup's first book is titled State of the Wild 2006: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands and Oceans. *She writes on science and the environment for national magazines and Web sites.*