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Crime chiefs agree to get tough on illegal tiger trade

By Mark Kinver Environment reporter, BBC News



About 4,000 tigers are estimated to remain in the wild

Crime chiefs from countries with populations of wild tigers have agreed to work together in order to combat the illegal trade in the big cats.

Heads of police and customs from 13 nations agreed to tighten controls and improve cross-border co-operation at a two-day meeting in Bangkok.

Only six subspecies remain, with fewer than 1,000 tigers in each group.

Smuggling of tiger parts is one of the main threats facing the planet's remaining big cats, say experts.

In detail: Tigers



- Scientific name: *Panthera tigris*
- There are six remaining subspecies: Amur; northern Indochinese; Malayan; Sumatran; Bengal and South China
- Three subspecies are now classified as extinct: Bali; Javan and Caspian
- Tigers' historical range once spread across Asia, from Turkey to the far east of Russia
- Over the past century, the animals have lost 93% of their historical range
- It is estimated that each adult tiger needs to kill "50 large prey" each year, but they are also opportunistic hunters, capturing fish, birds, reptiles etc
- Tiger habitats are primarily forests or scrubland

(Source: IUCN Red List)

The seminar in Thailand's capital, organised by Interpol and hosted by the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC), was attended by 26 senior crime officials and representatives from partner organisations, including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites).

'Natural heritage abuse'

"[Our efforts to fight tiger crime] must not just result in seizures - they must result in prosecutions, convictions and strong penalties to stop the flow of contraband," said [John Scanlon, Cites secretary general](#).

"If we get the enforcement system right for the tiger, we will help save countless other species together with their ecosystems."

Jean-Michel Louboutin, Interpol's executive director of police services, observed: "This important seminar has highlighted the environmental crime challenges facing senior law enforcement officers, and the need for enhanced international co-operation."

"Criminals cannot prosper from abusing our shared national heritage."

Delegates also used the meeting to formally endorse the Interpol-led [Project Predator](#).

The initiative, launched in November 2011, has three main aims:

- organising collaborative, high-level international efforts to improve political will to tackle the problem of illegal trade in tiger parts
- transforming politicians' will to act into tangible support from government departments and agencies
- training enforcement officers in the necessary skills

Project Predator is also encouraging countries to establish National Tiger Crime Task Forces, which will form working partnerships with Interpol, in order to provide "modern intelligence-led enforcement practices for tiger conservation".

Interpol said the project would not be limited to the protection of tigers, but would extend to the all of Asia's big cat species, such as the snow leopard and Asiatic lion, as these animals faced similar threats.

The meeting in Bangkok is the latest development in efforts to improve protection and conservation measures since a high-profile summit in November 2010 pledged to double the global population of tigers by 2022.

At the gathering in St Petersburg, Russia, senior political figures from the 13 range nations pledged to protect tiger habitats, address poaching, illegal trade and provide the financial resources for the plan.

Over the past century, tiger numbers have dropped from about 100,000 to about 4,000 tigers in the wild today.

And over the past decade, there has been a 40% decline, with conservationists warning that some populations were expected to disappear completely within 20 years unless urgent action was taken.

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Summit agrees tiger recovery plan



Tiger numbers have plummeted by 40% in the last decade alone

Governments of 13 countries where tigers still live have endorsed a plan to save the big cats from extinction.

Delegates at a summit in St Petersburg, Russia, agreed to double tiger numbers by 2022.

The countries will focus on protecting tiger habitats, addressing poaching, illegal trade and providing the financial resources for the plan.

In the last 100 years, tiger numbers have dropped from about 100,000 to less than 3,500 tigers in the wild today.

There has been a 40% decline in numbers in a decade, and some populations are expected to disappear within the next 20 years.

The United Nations Environment Programme (Unep) says that the St Petersburg Declaration will strengthen international collaboration to protect the majestic Asian wild cat.

"There was clearly a loud roar from St Petersburg this week on behalf of the last remaining tigers on our planet"

John Robinson, WCS

Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, executive-secretary of Unep's Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Secretariat, commented: "Safeguarding international migration corridors and trans-border habitats will be crucial for global efforts to save the tiger."

The declaration sets in motion a strategic plan for tiger recovery; the countries are putting together a roadmap for post-summit action.

They are also discussing the institutional structure which will be set up to implement the aims

and objectives of the declaration and its recovery programme.

"There was clearly a loud roar from St Petersburg this week on behalf of the last remaining tigers on our planet," commented John Robinson, chief conservation officer with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

"World leaders rarely find agreements at conferences and summits but the beloved tiger has proven to be a uniting force. And as we save the tiger, we have new hopes to save the world's biodiversity."

Titanic contributions

WCS was one of several groups pledging new money to assist conservation efforts, in this case \$50m over 10 years.



The World Bank, whose president Robert Zoellick takes a strong personal interest in the tiger, put in a similar amount, and aims to leverage further funding from governments and the corporate sector.

Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio donated \$1m to the effort.

Mr DiCaprio arrived in St Petersburg on Tuesday after two problems with his flights.

One plane was forced into an emergency landing after losing an engine, the other had to make an unscheduled stop after encountering strong headwinds.

Mr Putin described the actor as a "real man" - or "muzhik" - for his persistence in getting to the summit.

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India village in Rajasthan relocates to protect tigers



India's tiger numbers have shrunk from 100,000 to 1,700 in a little over a century

An entire village has been relocated in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan to protect tigers, officials say.

More than 350 people from 82 families in Umri village, in the Sariska tiger reserve, moved to a new location.

The number of tigers in Sariska had dwindled to zero before growing to five over the last three years.

Tiger numbers have shrunk alarmingly in India in recent decades. A 2011 census counted about 1,700 tigers in the wild.

A century ago there were estimated to be 100,000 tigers in India.

Compensation

Umri is the second village in Sariska to be relocated to help secure a proper habitat for tigers to increase their numbers. The villagers moved last week.

There are 11 villages with a population of nearly 2,500 people located in the heart of the tiger reserve which need to be relocated to improve the habitat, Rajasthan's chief conservator of forests, PS Somasekhar, told the BBC.

People living in these villages mostly belong to pastoral tribes.

Mr Somasekhar said efforts were being made to relocate four more villages over the next few years.

"It is a long-drawn process because the villagers have to agree to move out. We can't force them to leave. We can only persuade," he said.

The villagers are compensated with land, cash and livestock worth up to 1 million rupees (\$20,000) and relocated to the nearest cultivable plots outside the reserve, Rajasthan's chief wildlife warden AC Chaubey told the BBC.

The number of tigers in the 886-sq-km Sariska reserve dropped to zero from a high of 16 in 2002.

"To maintain a reserve of this size, we need a minimum of 20 female tigers to help with the breeding and a viable population of 80 to 100 tigers," Mr Somasekhar said.

There have been a number of incidents involving conflicts between local villagers and tigers in

the reserve - a few years ago, the villagers allegedly poisoned a tiger after it attacked one of their buffaloes.

India's most recent tiger census, held last year, indicated that numbers had increased to 1,706 from 1,411 at the last count in 2007.

Officials say conservation efforts by the government and wildlife organisations have helped tiger populations increase.

But poaching and conflicts between the tigers and people living in and on the periphery of the tiger reserves remains a threat.