

Tigers: Wild and commodified

The year 2020 was supposed to be a super year for biodiversity (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). Instead, it has been a tragic reminder of just how far we have strayed from a sustainable life on this planet. We have created the global climate and biodiversity crises and now around a million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction (Brondizio *et al.*, 2019).

The survival of the wild tiger is a barometer of how green our global recovery will be, and of how committed world leaders are to implementing the transformative changes required to prevent further global biodiversity collapse.

In 2010, there were an estimated 3200 wild tigers remaining across their Asian range, and despite a commitment by the leaders of Tiger Range Countries to double the wild tiger population by 2022 (World Bank, 2016), there are still fewer than 4000 wild tigers today.

Poaching of tigers for their body parts continues to be a primary driver of decline. Efforts to end demand for tiger parts and products – which are used for luxury ornamental purposes, medicines and trinkets – have been undermined by policies and weak enforcement that enable the use of captive bred, or ‘farmed’, tiger parts and products. Legal and illegal tiger farms have been allowed to flourish in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China. These farms range in scale of operation, from backyard enclosures with one or two tigers that are raised to maturity then slaughtered, to speed-breeding operations producing dozens, or even hundreds of cubs a year, often masquerading as ‘zoos’. Instead of phasing out tiger farms, as per a 2007 international agreement, there are now an estimated 8000 tigers in captivity across these “tiger-farming countries” (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2020).

Proponents of tiger farming claim that it will flood the market with a cheap alternative to wild tigers and thereby relieve pressure on the wild population. But the opposite has happened – and the empty tiger forests of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are testimony to this failed experiment. Criminal networks continued to profit from poaching and trafficking of wild tigers, financed by a spiralling demand that has been stimulated by the accessibility and seeming acceptability of trade in captive-bred tiger parts.

This commodification of the tiger in south-east and east Asia is in stark contrast to the situation in south Asia, where there are pockets of wild tiger population recovery. These glimmers of hope are derived in part from an underlying precautionary principle approach with laws prohibiting trade and tiger farming, inter-agency cooperation on law enforcement, and collaboration between NGOs, civil society and government. However, the key source of this success is the extraordinary cultural ties to the tiger among communities that co-exist with the big cats in the wild.

If tiger farming and trade in tiger parts and products is symbolic of our toxic relationship with nature, then learning from indigenous peoples who place a higher value on tigers being alive and in the wild is the tigers’ best hope for survival, and should be our guide. ■

References

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References continue in right-hand column

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