Project Tiger: a review

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Project Tiger was launched by the World Wildlife Fund in 1972. The author, who was closely involved in the project, examines the progress ten years later.

The 1970 census of tigers in India showed that the population had fallen from an estimated 40,000 in 1930 to only 1827 (plus or minus 10 per cent). The causes were obvious—the accelerating loss of habitat (India having lost 88 per cent of its original forests), the excessive and largely uncontrolled hunting, poaching and poisoning of tigers and the soaring prices of tiger-skin rugs and coats on the international market. It was clear that at such a rate of decline India would lose its most famous animal completely within a few years unless a dramatic effort were made to save it.

Investigations in other countries where tigers occurred revealed a similarly serious situation. Throughout its huge range in Asia, evidence could be found of only about 5000 tigers in scattered and widely separated groups. Of the eight known races, two were already extinct—the Caspian and the Balinese. The Javan race was represented by only five animals (now probably also extinct). There was no information about the Chinese race and only a few hundred Siberian and Sumatran tigers remained. The Indo-Chinese race, which had the greatest geographical range, was thought to number only about 2000.

The history of Project Tiger, launched by the WWF in 1972, and the international campaign to raise sufficient money to implement it, are now well known. The general public responded with remarkable generosity and within 18 months about £800,000 was raised world-wide. It was decided that a concentrated effort should be made first to save the Indian race, because of the assured personal interest and support of the Heads of State in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, where nearly all the tigers of this race occur.

In return for the promise of scientific assistance from the IUCN and technical equipment to the value of about £400,000 from the WWF, the Indian Government embarked on an extremely well-organised programme. Its scope can be judged by the fact that, apart from WWF funds, the Central and State Governments have since spent nearly £500,000 on the creation and manning of 11 tiger reserves. Four more are planned and four existing reserves are being enlarged. Tiger-hunting has been banned and both poaching and the black market in skins almost eliminated. The CITES convention has put a stop to the international trade in tiger skins.

By African standards the reserves are, of course, very small. The largest (Manas) is 2840 sq km, the smallest (Ranthambhore) only 392. Nevertheless, in total they represent some 16,000 sq km, or 2·10 per cent of India's surviving forest. In a country so densely populated with humans, the setting aside of even the smallest area for wildlife involves great problems. The skill of the Indian authorities in successfully translocating 33 overcrowded villages beyond reserve boundaries without any social protest deserves unstinted praise. As a result of the scientific management of vegetation and grazing, water resources and fire control, all forms of wildlife, including many rare species, have benefited dramatically. Mr H.S. Panwar, Director of Project Tiger in India, reports that the number of tigers has risen from 268 in nine reserves in 1972 to 749 in 11 reserves in 1980.

Following India's example, nine other Asian countries joined Project Tiger to a greater or lesser degree of effectiveness. China, where until recently tigers were classified as vermin to be exterminated, joined in 1979 after Sir Peter Scott's visit. China now protects the Siberian, Chinese and Indo-Chinese tigers which occur there. Only Burma, where the Indian and Indo-Chinese races meet on either side of the Irrawaddy, still affords no protection. But no

fewer than 40 tiger reserves are now listed by 10 Asian countries.

Much valuable information has been gleaned about the behaviour and ecological requirements of tigers as a result of the telemetric research programme conducted by the Smithsonian Institution in collaboration with the Nepalese government and the WWF. Management experience gained in India and Nepal is now reaching other countries, which also receive financial help from the WWF. All reports indicate population increases. For example, in the Sikhote Alin reserves in the Soviet Far East the number of Siberian tigers has doubled and they are beginning to spread across the North Korean and Chinese frontiers. The future will depend on maintaining efficient management of the reserves and on the willingness of governments to sustain them in spite of the world recession and the ever-increasing demands for more land and expenditure on human needs. The rape of Asia's forests continues unabated and what little replanting is being done is largely of commercial tree species which are unsuitable as tiger habitat. Inevitably, the population of tigers outside the established reserves is continuing to decline because of this loss of habitat.

Other problems also loom. The rapidity with which protected tigers increase suggests that the smaller reserves are nearing maximum carrying capacity. Tigers are strongly territorial; numbers cannot be compressed without causing often fatal territorial fighting. When excess animals spread outside reserves they are quickly in conflict with the surrounding villagers. A worrying increase in attacks on humans has already been reported, though not all of them were attributable to tigers from reserves. The need to counter in-breeding may require costly exchanges with other reserves if an adequate gene-flow is to be maintained. As an alternative it may be possible to provide in a few instances protected corridors for a natural interchange between closely adjacent reserves, as is now being planned in Nepal.

Meanwhile, despite all the difficulties, Project Tiger has unquestionably saved the species from the threat of extinction which in 1972 seemed so imminent.

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