

Tiger Trust Article

Introduction (Taken from The Tiger Trust)

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There are now thought to be less than 2,500 tigers in India - a massive 93% reduction on the estimated 40,000 alive at the beginning of this century. In five year's time, there could be none.

The Tiger Trust has uncovered details of at least 95 tigers slaughtered in India last year alone. This number represents only the tip of the iceberg; the true figure is unlikely to be less than 500 - one fifth of the remaining population.

The Indian tiger is in peril because of a rapidly escalating poaching epidemic supplying the illegal wildlife trade now widely recognized as the world's second largest racket (after drugs) with an annual turnover estimated by Interpol to be over US\$ 6 billion.

The tiger is not alone. Rhinos, elephants, leopards and bears are also being killed in large numbers as more and more people cash in on the complete lack of law and order in India's fabulous National Parks. And yet the Indian Government denies the problem and continues to publish inflated statistics showing a healthy and growing population of tigers throughout their reserves.

India's 'Project Tiger' program is currently in disarray and yet millions of dollars of foreign aid continue to be poured into the country's National Parks where poaching, illegal logging and cannabis cultivation is rife.

There is no anti-poaching program in India and therefore poachers operate with virtual impunity. No tiger-poacher has been convicted in the past two years.

Poachers deal with an organized network of criminals supplying the black-market in China and the Far East - the estimated black-market value of India's tigers in 1995 was US\$ 25 million.

And yet in spite of the vast amounts raised each year by WWF highlighting the plight of the species, little or nothing is being done to physically protect the tigers of India from the poachers who threaten their survival.

The Big Cat Cover Up is the result of over twelve month uncompromising field research and describes in detail the full extent of the poaching epidemic that is currently sweeping the length and breadth of India. It will undoubtedly dismay and upset a great many people. There will be those who will be shocked by its findings and there will be those who will be angered to find their names included in the text.

The primary intention of this report is to secure the long term survival of tigers in the wild. It is therefore hoped that its findings will be taken constructively by the governments, organizations and individuals concerned.

The Indian tiger is rapidly running out of time. Now, more than ever, they need a strong and implacable voice. Therefore the whole truth must be made public before it is too late.

The principal field researcher and his team have put themselves at considerable personal risk to collect this dossier of information. They have encountered high level corruption, incompetent bureaucracy and an

almost stupefying complacency amongst those in authority tasked with the very business of tiger conservation.

This is a story about a creature which now stands at the brink of extinction. It is told by a man who has never been afraid to confront the illegal wildlife trade; irrespective of consequences. It is about a cover-up so enormous - that having gone undetected for so long - now threatens the survival of one of the most magnificent animals ever to walk the earth.

The Big Cat Cover Up describes in uncompromising detail:

- How a country lost one fifth of its tiger population to organized crime in 1995 alone. And yet that country's former Prime Minister assured the world 'the protection of the tiger and its habitat has the highest priority on our national agenda' whilst allowing hundreds to be slaughtered during his term in office without lifting a finger to stop it.
- About the world's premier tiger reserve, filmed and documented in countless cinema and television productions, where poachers have slaughtered two-thirds of its tigers. And yet 'officially' no problem exists and 'tiger numbers are on the increase'.
- The International wildlife groups who callously exploit the tiger poaching crisis and raise millions of dollars, some by appealing directly to the children, and yet fail to protect the tiger.
- That the largest wildlife organization in the world is stock-piling some \$750,000 in tiger-conservation funds while the Indian tiger is slaughtered at the rate of one every eighteen hours.
- And exactly how the Indian Tiger can be saved for less than \$5,000,000.

The publication of this report may provide the last opportunity to reverse what will otherwise become the irrevocable annihilation of an invaluable wildlife asset. The Indian tiger can be saved and it can also earn the country millions of dollars in annual tourist revenue, but it will also take commitment and political will at the very highest level to contain the poachers and galvanize bureaucracy in order to achieve that.

Executive summary
The Naked Truth

The Indian tiger is currently at the mercy of a rapidly growing number of determined and well connected criminals who are exploiting the complete absence of an effective and coordinated anti-poaching deterrent in India. Last year it is thought that at least 500 tigers were killed by organized gangs of poachers supplying the illegal wildlife trade routes to China and the Far East. With a population now thought to be 2,500, it is not difficult to foresee the inevitable outcome of this illicit slaughter.

India's official population figures range from 2,750 to 3,750. There is however, a growing number of independent tiger experts in India today who will maintain that fewer than 2,500 tigers now survive. This report will argue that, regardless of whether the figure is 3,750 or 2,500, a critical and decisive point has already been breached and that a blue-print for extinction has been established.

Where once the Project Tiger Reserves of India were respected as an inviolate haven for much of the country's treasured flora and fauna, many of these areas have now become an open plundering ground where not only tigers, but elephants, rhinos, bears, leopards and a host of smaller cat and deer species are being slaughtered every day.

And yet in spite of the millions of dollars poured into tiger conservation every year by the Indian Central Government, the Indian State Governments, International aid agencies and others, no coordinated anti-poaching program is in operation and poachers continue to run riot throughout India unabashed, unhindered and uncaught.

In every area of tiger habitat surveyed by the Tiger Trust, all available evidence shows that the big cat is being systematically targeted to satisfy the unremitting appetite of the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and others for tiger body parts and derivatives; in spite of the fact that this trade is prohibited by both international convention and domestic law in nearly every country on earth.

Tiger poachers in India operate with virtual impunity and even if caught are able to exploit the country's impotent wildlife laws and are quickly released. Without conviction or punishment and safe in the knowledge that there exists no other form of deterrent to prevent them, they quickly return to pursue their illegal activities whilst at the same time proving to others that wildlife crime in India can, and indeed does, pay.

As the word spreads, more and more people seem prepared to abandon basic Hindu principals for the sanctity of life and seek immediate profit from the slaughter and sale of India's endangered and highly profitable wild tigers. Unaware that their short term greed is wiping out a species which attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year, poachers and wildlife traders are destroying any possibility of India successfully establishing a remunerative and sustainable wildlife tourist industry.

If the tiger is to recover from this latest poaching epidemic, it will require a positive, unified and fully funded protection strategy that puts well equipped and dedicated anti-poaching personnel between the tiger and the poaching gangs. Should this not happen as a matter of the utmost priority, not only will India lose a magnificent species of important cultural and historic significance, but also a creature whose very magnetism is capable of generating incalculable tourist revenue for the country in the future.

When the last Indian tiger is taken from the wild, the killing will not end there. There is already more than sufficient evidence to show that the illegal wildlife traders have begun to target the genetically comparable African lion. A whole pride was wiped out only last year and stripped of their highly valuable femurs. Although this information was available in some circles at the time, it was never made public. The possibility that Kenyan lions might become the next target for the poachers supplying the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) market can now no longer be ruled out. And therefore the economy of Kenya, heavily dependent on income earned from its wildlife tourist industry, may suffer a devastating blow if poaching in India is not immediately contained.

In the Manas Project Tiger reserve for example, previously healthy populations of the critically endangered greater one-horned rhinoceros have been effectively wiped out in the last two years. In the spring and early summer of 1996, there has been a dramatic resurgence of ivory poaching in Southern India with one gang reported to have killed at least 50 bull elephants in one month alone. Tigers have not fared any better.

It is thought that the black market value for each tiger in both body parts and derivative form is in the region of \$50,000 (the bulk of which is generated outside India.) The current slaughter of India's tigers is therefore fueling an international underground trade worth at least \$25,000,000 per year.

The Indian Tourist Office in London reports that income generated from tourism in 1994 was in the region of \$1.5 billion. They were unable to say how much of this was wildlife-related although their brochure does feature a large photograph of a tiger and a radiant description of the country's National Parks. Other sources

estimate that about 2% of visitors to India do so with the specific intention of viewing wildlife. This would indicate a legitimate wildlife market worth at least \$30,000,000 per year.

It is clear that the tiger entices the tourist-dollar and therefore, in theory at least, is not only capable of paying its own way but contributing to the nation's economy as a whole. Quite whether that rationale is sufficient to save it from extinction depends entirely upon the level of future cooperation-operation between Project Tiger authorities, regulatory bodies, law enforcement agencies and the Ministry of Tourism.

The Numbers Game

In order to fully grasp the enormity of the crisis currently facing the Indian tiger, it is essential to understand one fundamental point.:

Nobody really knows how many tigers are left in India today, it is essentially a matter of guesswork.

Officially, the Project Tiger authorities use a technique known as pugmark analysis to count tigers. This method is based on the fact that no tiger's pugmarks (paw-prints) are identically; rather like the principal of human finger-prints. In order to count tigers, a sheet of glass is placed on the ground covering each pugmark in a specific area.. Tracings are taken and subsequently scrutinized by a panel of experts who then determine the number of tigers as best they can. Whereas police authorities have developed a more or less fail-safe way to cross-check finger-prints against individual's identities, tiger pugmarks are seldom subjected to the same level of inspection.

A few years ago the scientist and tiger expert, Dr. K Ullas Karanth, conducted an investigation into the reliability of the pugmark technique and published his findings in a scientific paper in 1989. Dr. Karanth asked six wildlife managers, each having between 4 and 12 years of census taking experience behind them, to take part in a blind experiment which involved analyzing 33 tracings taken from an unspecified number of captive tigers. The results of the experiments showed that in fact none of the experts could identify even one tiger correctly and, quite remarkably, they estimated the total number of tigers involved in the experiment as being between 26 and 6. There were only four tigers used in that experiment.

The fact that all the experts over-estimated the number of tigers involved in the test is quite frightening. Should the current Project Tiger census statistics follow the same degree of errors, they might possibly be inflated by anything from 50 to 500%.

This could go some way to explain Mr. Richard Ives' staggeringly low tiger count of 700 in his recent book 'Of Tigers and Men: Entering the Age of Extinction', although it must be said that (as yet) few would agree with his pessimistic figure.

Because no absolute and definitive method of counting tigers is used, it is not surprising that the authorities prefer to talk up the population estimates and play down the otherwise contentious and politically embarrassing issue of poaching. Some politicians have even argued that, given what little official evidence they have ever seen, tiger poaching in India today is totally mitigated by the overall increase in Project Tiger Census numbers.

It is clear however, that Dr. Karanth's experiment shows that the pugmark counting method is fundamentally unsound and therefore the official statistics are not only unreliable but generally overstated as a result.

To dismiss reports of dramatic increases in poaching and the likelihood of exaggerated tiger census statistics would be extremely foolhardy. The Tiger Trust has gathered documentary evidence to suggest that some 95 tigers were taken by poachers last year alone. Peter Jackson, Chairman of the IUCN's Cat

Specialist Group, has consistently referred to 'the iceberg factor' (that which is visible is only one fifth of the whole) which would make the actual number of tigers poached during 1995 somewhere in the region of 475.

If only one third of these came from Project Tiger Reserves then clearly this loss should have been reflected somewhere in the Director's published statistics. The fact that an overall increase has been published in 1996 is therefore absurd.

More damaging is the blinding reality that such deception serves only to assist the illegal wildlife traders by concealing the true picture from those in authority who might otherwise be able to confront the problem. In addition, this deceit permits poaching to escalate unhindered and as it does, poachers multiply and tiger populations become severely eroded. Many to the point of what scientists now refer to as the extinction vortex.

The Extinction Vortex

The extinction vortex, as the term might suggest, is a rapid deceleration in population and I defined through a system for analyzing the levels of human intrusion that may be tolerated by a species before any damaging effect is apparent. Once a critical level has been exceeded, the species plunges into decline and if this decline is not arrested, extinction is the only possible outcome.

Few large mammals are capable of sustaining an indiscriminate 15-20% annual death toll without disastrous consequences to the species. Tigers are generally solitary and territorial creatures, factors that only exacerbate the effects of wholesale poaching. If a tigress with dependent cubs is killed, since the male plays little or no part in their care or feeding, those cubs subsequently die of starvation. If a dominant male is killed, fights break out amongst the others in the ensuing battle for territorial control. The victor of this struggle inevitably establishes his dominance by killing the cubs of females not sired by him, instinctively knowing that those tigresses will subsequently come into estrous and his own bloodline will prevail. However this process can disrupt breeding patterns for up to two year during which time more tigers are poached and the tiger's social upheaval is intensified. The loss of female reproductive potential and the disruption of the social system of tigers, which leads to low cub survival, means that the impact of poaching is far greater than the actual number of tigers lost.

In 1993, the Indian government authorities claimed they had a total population of 3,750 tigers. Of these, 1,366 (36%) were 'well protected' in 23 Project Tiger reserves. Two years later, in October 1995, in his opening address to the Asian Regional meeting of the UN-sponsored CITES the Director of Wildlife Preservation in India assured delegates that 'preliminary results just in from the recent census indicate that populations of Indian tigers are increasing by 3-5% in the Project Tiger Reserves'. This statement was based on information supplied by the Project Tiger Director, Mr. Arin Ghosh, and it had the devastating effect of quashing any further substantive debate on the illegal tiger trade at that crucial meeting.

TABLE???? The complete Project Tiger census figures for 1995 are still to be released, however by the time this report went to press (1st September 1996), results from twenty of the twenty-three reserves has been made public. Figures from the Sunderbans, Kalakad-Mundanthurai and Valmiki are still being compiled. Analysis of the results to date indicate an overall increase of 30 tigers or a population growth of 2.86% in the Project Tiger Reserves.

Officially, it would appear that in the 'well protected' areas, the Indian tiger is in no real danger at all, and as far as the Project Tiger authorities are concerned, there has been a moderate but healthy increase in numbers.

so what's all the fuss about then?

It has been established that the sum total of tigers counted by the pugmark census technique is suspect. Mr. Valmik Tahpar, a distinguished tiger expert, reckons that there are only 2,500. Mr. S. Deb Roy, former Director of Wildlife Preservation in India, feels that there are between 2,800 and 3,200. The authorities steadfastly maintain that there could be as many as 3,750 wild tigers in India today, and so on. And yet in spite of the obvious disparity in estimates coupled with the unquestionable volume of poaching evidence (reviewed later in detail), few people have dared to examine the probable outcome if and when the lowest population figure is either established or breached.

One tiger expert of international repute has in fact looked into the question of population erosion. Tiger studies carried out by Dr. Charles (Chuck) McDougal with the Smithsonian Tiger Ecology Project in Nepal, conclude that in a natural population without external human pressures such as poaching, tiger numbers tend to remain stable and have very modest fluctuations. It follows therefore that any unnatural interference by man, especially when driven by market forces operating outside and regardless of the law, is bound to impact upon the natural ecology of the tiger and its overall numbers. Is it possible then to quantify the likelihood of extinction?

Dr. Chuck McDougal, together with three American conservation biologists, have computed a formula for doing just that. Their work suggests that in small populations (below 120 individuals), poaching of 4% of the population leads to only minimal chances of extinction (less than 5%). However, the moment poaching reaches 8% and continues unabated for 3 years, there is a 95% chance of extinction.

We know that of the 23 Project Tiger Reserves in India, only Sunderbans has an assured population of more than 120 tigers. The Corbett Project Tiger Reserve with an 'official' tiger count of 128, is the subject of a later case study and as it will be shown, the 1996 Project Tiger census statistic is unsound.

It is therefore safe to suggest that 95% (22 out of 23) of the Project Tiger Reserves fall into the category of 'small populations'. It is even possible to extrapolate this percentage across the country as a whole because we know with almost complete certainty that no large tiger populations exist today beyond those of the Project Tiger Reserves.

Therefore, of the 'maximum official' nation-wide estimate of 3,750 tigers, which is made up of dozens of small and frequently isolated populations, virtually all qualify for the application of McDougal's formula.

The Tiger Trust has uncovered evidence to suggest that at least 475 tigers were poached last year (1995) which represents a minimum of 12.5% of the total maximum population (4.5% above McDougal's critical 8% ceiling). The picture is even more alarming if the lowest official population figure of 2,750 is measured against the estimated poaching number of 475, in which case the slaughter represents a staggering 17.25% of the total population.

It will be established later that the tiger poaching in India today is widespread and that no Project Tiger Reserve remains immune from its influence. Clearly if this level of poaching is allowed to continue unchallenged, the remaining Indian tigers will be sucked into the extinction vortex.

Where First...?

Perhaps the most famous of all India's tiger reserves is Ranthambhore in the State of Rajasthan. The park's magnificent lakes and abandoned fortress made Ranthambhore the perfect backdrop for dozens of wildlife television and film documentaries broadcast in hundreds of countries over the years. The park's tigers were minor celebrities and the names of Ghenghis, Noon and Laxmi became familiar to millions of tiger enthusiasts around the world. Although the Project Tiger Directorate has yet to admit it, these tigers and others are now dead; their bones and body parts smuggled out of the country to China and the Far East.

Despite continual and manifestly ludicrous Project Tiger claims to the contrary, it is now well known that the population of tigers in Ranthambhore declined dramatically from around 40 tigers in 1991 to fewer than 20 in less than two years. And yet the 'official' Project Tiger census conducted in 1993 found 36. Any opposition at the time to the official government line was quashed and dissenters summarily ridiculed, dismissed or transferred. As far as the Project Tiger Directorate was concerned, there was no poaching! The case of Ranthambhore focused world attention on the gravity of the tiger crisis at the time and independent investigations that followed pointed to a large scale slaughter throughout the park. Nevertheless, the government maintained its position and in time media interest subsided and the issue was forgotten.

Quite remarkably, the 1995 Project Tiger census reveals an incredible increase to 38 tigers in the park. Following a recent undercover investigation detailed later in this report, the Tiger Trust will maintain that perhaps fewer than 15 tigers survive in Ranthambhore today and those that do may be beyond all redemption.

And Next?

It will be demonstrated later that Ranthambhore is not the only target for poachers. A further case study will show that Manas National Park in Assam has been beyond the control of the forest department since 1987. Escalating acts of violence and terrorism including bombings of bridges and communication systems has left only 6 of the 43 guard-posts in the park functional. A previously healthy population of the greater one-horned rhinoceros has been effectively wiped out and yet the Project Tiger authorities claim that tiger populations have miraculously survived and increased by sixteen percent from 81 in 1993 to 94 this year. Tiger Trust field investigations show that a massive reduction in tiger numbers in the park has already occurred, the full extent of which may only be known once an accurate and impartial census is properly undertaken.

Dedicated, knowledgeable and reliable non-governmental organizations working near Corbett National Park suggest that the area can today claim to have no more than 90 tigers; a massive 30% reduction on the 'official' 128 declared by Project Tiger in 1996. Similarly, in militancy - hit Dudhwa the official figure is 98 but this is vehemently denied by Mr. Billy Arjan Singh - founder of the world famous Tiger Haven - who, with a lifetime's experience at the park, is convinced that no more than 60 tigers survive in Dudhwa today.

Clearly if this pattern of contradictory population estimates is established then the Project Tiger authorities, and those that support them, have a lot of explaining to do. In the past, they have held all the trump cards and could summarily reject the contentious and politically embarrassing claims of established tiger experts throughout India. International politics and diplomacy have prevented any forthright intervention from outside and India's tigers have continued to suffer as a result.

If this situation remains unchallenged and the poachers continue to run riot, India will lose its tigers - of that there seems little doubt.