

Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned!

by

Jason Savage

Now change a few words and you come up with 'Scientists and governments fiddled while tigers died'. This is the scenario on the tiger front. While one of the most magnificent predators on earth vanishes, one that has been around for six million years and is an integral part of rain forest and related ecosystems, governments take no meaningful stand, and scientists are infatuated with trying to insure subspecies purity. These stands will lead nowhere.

I have compiled for you excerpts from papers that present a different picture of what is actually happening in this fight to save the tiger. I was fortunate enough to meet and become friends with Dr. Michael Bleyman, the eminent scientist and tiger expert who founded the Carnivore Preservation Trust. He passed away at age 58 from cancer in 1996, but the time I got to spend with him was extremely enlightening. He imparted to me an understanding of the tiger's eminent extinction unless a plan was implemented to save it as a species in general.

He maintained that if the species is to survive we need a gene pool of healthy generic tigers in a safe captive breeding environment from which future generations could draw to reintroduce them into safe, wilderness habitats. This would be done after governments in selected regions made it a priority to protect these areas, and after ancient Chinese medicine myths have disappeared, taking the lucrative illicit trade in tiger bone and body parts with it.

Poaching is exterminating the tiger. From eminent tiger expert Billy Arjan Singh come these facts. "The trade in skins and bones for export to the far east has expanded to an astronomical degree. The Trade Value of these Derivatives is estimated at about **six billion dollars**, or second only to the Narcotic Trade. Tiger Skins are valued at \$15,000 and bones at \$1250 a Kg. All tiger parts have market value, and a plate of tiger penis soup sells for \$320 in Taiwanese restaurants." Tigers cannot survive this onslaught.

The Guardian: September 12, 1996

"...WWF repudiated the allegations but did not disagree that the tiger was facing extinction or that poaching was the main problem." Allegations were made by Michael Day, director of Tiger Trust, that the World Wildlife Fund was raising nearly 200 million pounds a year using the tiger as a symbol for fund raising, but spending only 50,000 pounds on tiger projects in India. "WWF admits there is a crisis and the tiger faces extinction..."

Judy A. Mills: Director of TRAFFIC East Asia: (TRAFFIC is the wildlife trade monitoring program of the WWF)

"The demand for tiger bone in traditional Chinese medicine is pushing three of the world's remaining five subspecies of tiger ever closer to extinction and threatening the long-term survival of the species as a whole."

If you read articles about the tiger population in the wild you will find that estimates range from 4,500 to 7,500. Many census takings rely on identifying pugmarks (tiger prints). Can we believe these estimates, or are they exaggerated to indicate successes in conservation? Following is a paragraph on this census technique quoted from a Tiger Trust article by Michael Day.

"Scientist and tiger expert Dr. K Ullas Karanth conducted an investigation into the reliability of the pugmark (tiger foot prints) 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 experiment 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 the experiment."

Better electronic counting techniques are now available, but are not yet widely used.

The Chairman of the Cat Specialist Group of the IUCN at a Press Conference in New Delhi on the 30th March 1995 stated:

"The tiger will be virtually extinct in the wild by 1999, unless India and the other Range States declare open war on poachers, and illegal traders, and throw all the resources required into the battle. Some scattered individuals will remain, and produce some young for a decade or two into the 21st Century, but in fact we will have seen the end of the tiger.

A review of the situation in India, and South East Asia shows that poaching is accelerating with well organized illegal trade networks, sometimes with the connivance of officials. Actual seizures indicate that hundreds of tigers are being poached every year in India alone, primarily for Chinese medicine.

If the governments of Tiger Range States do not have the political will to save the tiger, then the future is bleak for wild nature and human welfare. Tiger conservation does not involve only a single species. It means saving large tracts of Asia's tropical forests, and their wildlife. Forests and the natural world in general are the foundation of all life on earth, including that of humans, who rely on complex ecological systems for food, water and clean air, and many products used in their lives. Economic development will ultimately fail, unless recognition is given to the vital importance of maintaining natural systems of which the tiger is part and symbol."

India has an estimated 2,500 tigers remaining, and that's if you believe the proven unreliable census techniques. It is also estimated that one or more a day is taken for the bone trade. Simple math reveals the ultimate result.

Billy Arjan Singh: Founder of Tiger Haven-India. Mr. Singh is probably the leading tiger conservationist in the world. He is the only man to successfully reintroduce a generic tiger, one named Tara, into Dudhwa National Park. This was met with furor by the scientific community. He has been on the front lines of this fight to save the tiger for many years, but has been met with indifference and criticism for his heroic efforts. I have selected portions from papers he published because they are very important for your understanding of the tiger's plight and the need for **immediate** action.

This first section summarizes India's *Project Tiger*:

"The IUCN General Assembly met in Delhi in November 1969. Alerted by the presentation of a paper by K. S. Sankhala, who postulated an alarming fall in the numbers of tigers surviving due to the operations of 26 hunting outfitter companies in India claiming to earn valuable foreign exchange by killing tigers, and persuaded by my resolution proposing a ban on tiger shooting in India. A resolution by the General Assembly was unanimously passed suggesting a moratorium on tiger hunting and its replacement by efforts to explore the tourist potential of the tiger.

The Government of India, influenced by the overwhelming interest of Mrs. Gandhi, and the offer of a million dollar donation made by Guy Mountfort on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund, initiated Project Tiger in 1972-73. The Project was inaugurated in 1973 at Corbett National Park with great euphoria.

Initially a species-oriented project generated tremendous enthusiasm: the conservation of the world's largest and most glamorous predator became the warhead for the preservation of its ecosystem. My suggestion of

adopting the tiger as our national animal was accepted by the Indian Board for Wildlife.. Sankhala, who had played a prominent part in the origination of Project Tiger, became its first Director.

Once Project Tiger had been accepted as an attempt to preserve the tiger in the wild, The International Union for the Conservation of Nature which is the international scientific Union gave its opinion that a population of 300 in a contiguous habitat area of 2000 to 3000 square miles was a minimal density required for preserving the species in perpetuity. It was immediately realized that such an area was possible in none of the Projects selected, especially in view of the opposition by the Forest Department to relinquish forestry areas for the conservation of wildlife. It was therefore necessary to explore other avenues for the introduction of a genetic diversity to ensure a survival of the tiger for all time."

THE LAST HURRAH

"As the time approaches for final extinction, for me as an individual, and for the tiger as a race, I feel that I should share my thoughts with my countrymen, many of whom do care, for the demoralizing extinction of processes of evolution of animate creations, by the rapacity of the human race.

We have ravaged habitat of underground dwellers by the plunder of fossil fuels built up over the millennia and by strip mining. We have razed great timber stands, and unleashed floods and siltation for short-term political motives. We continue to rob the oceans of their sustainable wealth in international bickerings. We have upset the rhythm of life by the unrestrained proliferation of the human race and savage experimentation with other life forms, to preserve our own species. We continue to grab the habitats of vulnerable entities. We have transformed the tolerance of religions, into religious bigotry to serve political ends. The civilizing processes over the ages has projected itself in the spurious claim of the use of wildlife derivatives for medicinal functions.

The final extinction of the tiger, in all its eight subspecies, has been widely and sympathetically written about internationally, but sympathy alone cannot stem the rot. Basic measures are required to halt the lure of enormous profits of the skin and bone trade. This effort must be an international one--to obliterate the final destination of these derivatives, and a Indo-Nepal one to abolish the incentives of the internal trade.

Project Tiger was *initially* a success while it was a species-oriented project, but progressively registered failure when the academics of preserving the ecosystem replaced the symbolic value of the tiger. Even the temporary increases in population were caused by immigrations due to destruction and degradation of habitat in Nepal, and not to the widely acclaimed success in directional policy in India.... Project Tiger is now a **complete failure**."

Mr. Singh went on to offer a solution for the tiger. It is one that Dr. Michael Bleyman, founder and director of the Carnivore Preservation Trust in Pittsboro, North Carolina, advocated for many years.

"In conclusion, we must work on the basis of presumptions made by the IUCN, which is the scientific branch of the two associations which direct international wildlife conservation. It is their computation that a population of 300, in a contiguous area of 2000 to 3000 sq. miles, is necessary for preservation of the tiger in perpetuity. Assessed by this parameter, there is *no* such area available in India; though the India/Bangladesh Sunderban could qualify area-wise, the wildlife estimates are outrageously uncertain. Failing these qualifications, it is evident that some process of gene pool augmentation is essential, and though the Chinese onslaught may hasten the end, the restricted populations of Tiger Reserves are all fated to see the extinction of the tiger due to inbreeding at some stage. Therefore the solution of "captive breeding" should not be rejected out of hand and can well be one of the options for the creation of a dynamic gene bank."

The problem one faces from the traditional scientific community is succinctly outlined by correspondence received by Mr. Singh. On the 5th of October 1981 Mr. Singh received a letter from the Director of Project

Tiger which he quotes in its entirety because it illustrates the genesis of the problems which bedevil Tiger Conservation:

"I have received a Volley of correspondence, mostly from persons I connected with zoos in Europe. They have alleged that Tara, which I was given to you from Twycross Zoo, was not a pedigree Indian tigress, and that because of her uncertain and mixed origin she was not listed in the Indian tigers in the International Tiger Stud Book. You have claimed that Tara has been successfully rehabilitated into the Dudhwa National Park. Notwithstanding the converse views of the Director, it will be a catastrophe of the highest order genetically if our breed of tigers are contaminated by one of impure lineage. Nobody should be more concerned about this than you, whose whole body and soul have gone into the making of Dudhwa.

The information of Tara being not pure is authentic, and in such an event we must consider her elimination before she breeds--I understand that you hold that she has not bred yet. Needless to say our image as conservationists is coming to be maligned in the correspondence that is ensuing among Universities, Zoos and IUCN in Europe."

A letter to Mr. Singh from Sir Peter Scott read in part, "I am writing this at the request of the Survival Services Commission, Steering Committee which has expressed concern regarding a tigress which was sent to you from Twycross zoo with a view we were told to carrying out a reintroduction experiment....IUCN are most concerned that subspecies are kept pure. We understand that the tigress in question is already a hybrid between two races, and if she breeds it will make a further genetic cocktail and from a scientific and conservationist point of view, [which] would be most deplorable.

Could you confirm that this will not be allowed to happen, so that I may report back to the commission at its meeting in Florida at the end of the month." The use of the term hybrid by Sir Peter Scott is incorrect. He should have said generic since the tigress was a product of the union between two tigers.

This sums up the general feelings of the scientific community. Mr. Singh had this to say about their postulations. "The notion that preservation of the genes in a subspecies is a 'Pious onus upon conservationists' at the expense of the ravages of inbreeding is a crime against natural species and their well being, and in this particular case, of a successful reintroduction, dictated by an insensate desire to denigrate a consummation which Project officials had declared *impossible*." Mr. Singh later went on to say, "The tiger had existed for six million years, and subspecies [perhaps] only came into existence with a fragmentation of habitat which is comparatively very recent, and there is still possibly an overlap on the Asian mainland.

The compartmentalization of subspecies is possibly too dogmatic? It should be for consideration that *generic* tigers which are recommended for extinction should redeem their unfortunate existence by repopulating selected habitat areas of erstwhile Balinese, Javan and Caspian occupation, for these tigers are already in a process of a genetic transition.

It is a fact that tigers have a common ancestry, and this theoretically predicates that an outsize Siberian could evolve into a undersized Balinese. Yet though the subspecies are disappearing one after the other, scientific dogma insists that racial purity must be preserved, and that generic [i.e., of unknown lineage] tigers in zoos should be *earmarked for extinction*, in accordance with a carefully maintained *studbook*.

It should be the endeavor of the various countries who have lost their tiger subspecies to re-colonize these vacant habitats. This might be done by the introduction of generic tigers and their progeny, which are earmarked for destruction. Hopefully their modified morphology would at some stage in the evolution to reestablish the Balinese, Javan, and Caspian, subspecies. Generic tigers are genetic transients who can reclaim an inheritance and not pariahs bred for extinction."

You will recall the mention of stud books. The AZA (American Zoo and Aquarium Association) has a Species Survival Program (SSP) that maintains such records. These can be useful for developing healthy generic tigers, but will they be used for that purpose? Dr. Bleyman stated that at one TAG (Taxon

Advisory Group) meeting a representative from the AZA proclaimed, "We would like to manage tigers in the wild until extinction." That encapsulates it pretty well. Are these records maintained to save species or are they maintained to keep generic tigers from diluting subspecies purity? When we are faced with loosing the tiger in total from this planet, what is the sense in a dogmatic pursuit of subspecies integrity? One answer seems to point to the saving of jobs in this hopeless endeavor by the scientific community and the fund raising organizations who keep them in business. What are they going to do when the tiger is extinct?

From Billy Singh, September 22, 1997:

"A favorable development is world concern to halt the tiger's advance towards extinction. The tiger is a competitor, and in a democratic set up, there is **no** place for him in an expanding economy. Developed countries with no predators and mesmerized by its sheer magnificence say "Save the Tiger, but save him in your country." Under their influence, and the surmise that wildlife cannot exist without the consent of peripheral inhabitants, but persuasion of the public is a long term prospect, and saving the tiger is NOW."

From a USA Today Article on Tigers: December 9, 1997

Larry Farrington, senior investigator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Torrence, Calif., says Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver, British Columbia, have become the primary hot spots of the Western world for importing illegal tiger parts and products. "We make seizures of unlawfully imported and exported wildlife on a daily basis," he says. "The tiger skeleton and large-scale cases are less frequent, but they occur regularly."

Farrington says the only reason his agents and those at other ports do not see more tiger parts is because so few are left. A new problem, however, involves domesticated tigers in the USA, which probably outnumber tigers in the wild. Farrington says he fears that these legally captive tiger pets are catching the eye of criminals. "The number of cases so far is small, but some of the circumstances are fairly egregious," Farrington says. "There are true stories of hunters going to game farms where aging tigers are literally coaxed out of their cages and lured far enough away from the vehicle to appear to be in the wild, then shot and photographed."

As more wild tigers disappear and the demand for medicinals continues to increase, Farrington says, "our fear is sooner or later we will see some of these captive animals finding their way into illegal markets."

Mr. Farrington is correct, but understates the problem. When the tigers have disappeared in the wild great pressure will be brought to bare on the captive tigers. Mr. Farrington also mistakenly refers to these tigers as domesticated and pets. If you've ever been around tigers you would know they are not pets or domesticated, although some owners parade these animals around irresponsibly as if they were.

Many may ask, "Why do you want to save the tiger? Let nature take its course. If an animal is meant to survive it will." I've heard this rhetoric put forth on national talk shows by well meaning but obviously undereducated people when it comes to understanding the relationships of animals to ecosystems. The tiger *would* survive if there were no humans. Nature would get along marvelously if not for the greed and indifference of many people, corporations, and governments. We need to save the tiger because we can! It is an integral part of major ecosystems, it is a beautiful felid that our children's children have a God given right to behold. If a powerful predator like the tiger, who has roamed this earth for six million years is lost, Homosapiens will not be far behind.

I will not let this bleak outlook pass without offering a workable solution to the issue. The tiger as a species *can* be saved. The infatuation with subspecies in the wild will continue among the scientific community. I doubt they will be swayed from their stance. A secure, self contained, genetically managed preserve where tigers have the freedom to roam extensive acreage is absolutely feasible. Dr. Bleyman said to me, "Just look at CPT. This is a working prototype of a much larger facility."

This preserve would be devoted to healthy *generic* tigers, protected in captive habitats for future generations. (Generics are sited because it would be easier to collect eligible founding pairs. I heard from a contact in Australia that said pure stud book Siberians are available, but that has to be researched. Work with a pure subspecies could be pursued at the same time.) Extensive state of the art security would absolutely prevent poaching, which will ultimately plague zoos and small private preserves after the tiger is extinct in the wild. This will continue until every tiger that can find its way to the illicit derivative market is taken.

This facility would be a virtual fortress for the protection of a species, but it would not resemble a walled, barb wired prison. It would appear more like a *Jurassic Park* where visitors are encouraged and education plays a predominant roll. You must remember, if you saw the movie *Jurassic Park*, they were trying to secure dinosaurs, not tigers. Tigers can be maintained successfully and safely in extensive habitats as demonstrated by the Carnivore Preservation Trust and many large zoos. Zoos, however, are not setup with extensive security, and they are not designed to save and maintain a specific species of this size indefinitely. This **must** to be the domain of a specialized preserve. One that needs to be developed today, for tomorrow will be too late. The loss of the tiger would indeed be a sad beginning to a new millennium.