

# The Tiger - Vanishing With Barely a Whimper

by *Michael Woods*

I have just seen a wild tiger. It is probably the only one I will ever see because, unless the world acts soon, all but an elusive handful of these cats will have disappeared.

This beautiful animal, the wonderful creature of nursery, fiction and poetry, the awe-inspiring linchpin of myth, legend and religion, is about to become extinct. But how is it that the largest of the big cats has reached this state and what, if anything can be done to ensure its recovery?

Half a century ago there were between 25,000 and 30,000 tigers in Asia. According to "Killed for a Cure", a report on the worldwide trade in tiger parts published in 1994 by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) this number has fallen to between 5,000 and 7,400.

The total number of tiger sub-species has been reduced from eight to five and these are scattered around 14 Asian countries, including the two most densely populated countries in the world, China and India. Malaysia has about 600 as does Indonesia; Bangladesh has 300, Vietnam and Russia 200 each and the other countries have smaller numbers still. Only India has a substantial number with more than 60 per cent of the world population.

Not surprisingly this is where tiger conservation has tended to be concentrated. It was here that Project Tiger was launched in 1973 when it seemed that the animal was spiraling into extinction at a time when tiger hunting and the export of skins was still legal.

Indira Gandhi, India's former prime minister, embraced the cause giving it political will, and backing it with several million dollars. The tiger was protected and Project Tiger reserves were established. It was a success and, for a while, it appeared to have worked. But, as Peter Jackson, chairman of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, said, the real crisis emerged in 1992. "Tigers which I knew well in Ranthambhore National Park, simply disappeared until half the known tigers had gone."

Ranthambhore is a beautiful park of open plains and dense woodland in a complex of rolling hills and deep gorges. Here there are herds of spotted and sambar deer living alongside antelope and wild boar while peacocks strut and cry among the trees and along the lake shores.

Even with only half its tigers, 80 per cent of those taking game drives still see the striped cats which are remarkably relaxed here and do not skulk in the undergrowth as they do elsewhere. Sadly I was not one of the lucky ones. I did not see a single tiger and, in spite of the occasional pug mark pressed into the dust, it almost felt as if every one had now disappeared in the tiger's new crisis - to feed the demand for traditional Chinese medicine.

Almost every part of the tiger is traditionally used by the people of China, Japan and Korea and to some extent other Asian countries to cure a variety of ailments. The demand for tiger bone appears to be the main force which drives up the price in the commercial market. Last year, in India alone, parts from 50 tigers were discovered. According to Jackson the number can be multiplied by a factor of five or six to reach the true figure.

In Burman it is still not illegal to kill tigers. Burma, Laos (Laos PDR) and Cambodia are not signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. But even some countries which are, only pay lip service to the requirements. Japan, a major tiger part consumer, has no legislation to prevent domestic sales. Customs officials either refuse to admit that a trade in tiger parts exists or lack resources to do more.

In 1994 an undercover operation disclosed that in Chinese communities in London, Manchester and Birmingham, 50 per cent of traditional pharmacists had tiger part products in stock. There have been convictions in Britain as a result.

As the countries of South East Asia experience booming economies, so traditional Chinese medicine becomes more affordable to their peoples. And, far from turning away from such traditions, with increasing economic strength comes a rejection of western influence in favor of a return to traditional values. The market is vast and trying to influence such deeply held beliefs seems all but impossible.

However, there are glimmers of light. At the end of last year, Judy Mills, co-author with Peter Jackson of "Killed for a Cure", helped to organize an international symposium in Hong Kong which brought together wildlife conservationists and specialists in traditional Chinese medicine from throughout the region to discuss the sustainable use of wildlife. She sees persuasion rather than censure as the way forward.

In March, at a meeting in Hanoi, tiger specialists from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, where WWF International claims that tigers are disappearing at the rate of one a week, drafted plans for action to save their tigers by finding out more about them and by trying to suppress international trade. Against enormous local opposition a group is trying to do much the same thing in Korea where the Siberian sub-species of tiger is at risk and where the size of its population is small but unknown.

A much larger number of Siberian tigers still hangs on across the border in the Russian Far East. WWF suggests that the rate of poaching here has slowed and it is funding a big effort to census the animals. The signs are not good, however, in this remote Russian area.

To add to the tiger's problems, large areas of forest are disappearing in Malaysia while in Thailand tiger habitat is becoming increasingly fragmented by roads, dams and human settlements. In India, where elections are to take place shortly, there are national pressures on existing tiger reserves from oil companies as well as demands from local communities for grazing and fuel wood.

Ranthambhore is a perfect example of the agricultural pressures. It stands as an island of wilderness in an area of impoverishment. One evening, as we reached the gates, we found a group of people huddled around a fire made of wood confiscated from local people. "It will make no difference," said my guide, "they will be back tomorrow cutting more." Valmik Thapar's Ranthambhore Foundation has been working since 1987 to improve the situation for those living around its boundaries. Its schemes include the provision of buffaloes to reduce the number of dairy cows villagers need to keep, tree planting schemes and primary health care programs.

Corbett National Park, named after the famous hunter of man-eaters, is much more fortunate than Ranthambhore for it has a buffer of forest around it which acts as a shock absorber. I stayed in the Claridges Corbett Hideaway, a new and comfortable safari camp on the edge of the park just a few minutes by jeep from the gate. But it was on an evening when I slept in a bungalow in the core area of the park that I saw my tiger.

It was not a pleasant experience. Mounted on elephants we swayed quietly through the forest to where a male tiger had killed a sambar a few days before. It was still there and as we approached, growled from deep cover. The elephants milled round it so that everyone could see the animal and then, as it began to get dark, one mahout pressed his elephant closer. The tiger charged, lashing out. Fortunately it was time to leave. This offensive spectacle was not how I wanted to see a tiger nor the way in which a Project Tiger reserve should be treating its most precious charges.

Fortunately not all tiger watching is so grisly and, especially at Ranthambhore where the animals are so relaxed, it can be a highly enjoyable experience.

Ecotourism is one way in which money can be channeled to where it is required. At present park fees are laughably low and little opportunity is taken to inform the western visitor of the plight of the tiger. An American I talked to knew that tigers were endangered but had no idea why. She was not untypical of the rest of the park visitors at Ranthambhore. Yet every foreign visitor could be an ambassador for the tiger on their return home.

Moreover, organizations such as Care for the Wild have found that the tiger is a huge generator of donations. And those who give not only provide money to support the Ranthambhore Foundation but also to buy vehicles and equipment to combat poachers on the ground.

There was an overwhelming feeling of helplessness among those associated with park staff who are ill-equipped and often poorly motivated to search out and confront well-armed poachers. Project Tiger, which once gave powerful protection to these park areas, is now floundering according to WWF.

There are still tigers to be seen in the many tiger reserves, especially in India, but, as Peter Jackson admits, the long term future is bleak. Even if the current situation can be turned round, the demand for tiger parts reduced and the poachers stopped, tigers now live in isolated populations.

Most of these island reserves, cut off from one another by people, are too small. Each needs to support a minimum of 100 tigers in order for the cats to be genetically sustainable. Only the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve on the border of India and Bangladesh has a sufficiently large population. It seems that the tiger will not make a grand exit, as might befit such a regal cat. Instead, unless profound changes take place in the near future, its populations will slowly dribble away until it is no longer seen in the wild and it will have gone without even a whimper.

*Michael Woods' visit was arranged through "A Journey Through India", the tour operation arm of Greaves Travel using British Airways scheduled flights. Address: 34 Marylebone High Street, London W1M 3PF. Tel: 0171-487 5687. He stayed at The Claridges Corbett Hideaway and at the Sawai Madhopur Lodge, Ranthambhore.*