

Year of the Tiger billed as last stand against extinction

The Year of the Tiger has been billed as the big cat's best chance to escape extinction, but activists say poaching and government inaction are undermining a campaign to double the number of wild tigers.

Just 3,200 tigers are believed to survive in the jungles of Asia and the forests of Russia's Far East, down from an estimated 100,000 a century ago, and that number is still declining.

Butchered for traditional medicine, deprived of their habitat and killed for encroaching on villages -- the onslaught has already seen three sub-species wiped out and the South China tiger has not been sighted for decades.

Conservationists are seizing on the Year of the Tiger to secure the funding and political will needed to protect wild populations and suppress demand for tiger products from the major markets of China and Vietnam.

The unprecedented focus includes a summit on tiger conservation in Russia in September, and the UN wildlife trade body's talks in Doha this month which will consider a resolution condemning tiger farming.

A ban on trade in tiger parts was implemented in 1975, marking one of the first initiatives under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

But CITES chief Willem Wijnstekers admitted in Doha this week that efforts to save the tiger had "failed miserably" and the great cat was walking ever closer to extinction.

"2010 is the Chinese Year of the Tiger and the International Year of Biodiversity. This must be the year in which we reverse the trend. If we don't, it will be to our everlasting shame," he said.

The spotlight on the charismatic species has bolstered the hopes of activists who have set an ambitious goal to double the wild population by the next Year of the Tiger in 2022.

Unlike the reluctant panda, tigers can reproduce rapidly if they have access to enough territory that is free from poachers' snares, and a ready supply of deer which are their main prey.

"That's why in some ways we're quite hopeful that we can double the number of tigers because once you put in the effort you can see quite rapid change," says Michael Baltzer, head of conservation group WWF's Tiger Initiative.

Baltzer says that efforts to suppress "highly professional" poaching gangs have allowed populations to begin expanding in parts of Thailand, and there are "great hopes" for Cambodia which has very few tigers but plenty of habitat.

But elsewhere there is little progress, and in Russia where numbers had been revived to some 500 after falling to just a few dozen in the 1930s, the population is again on the decline.

Tiger farms which operate openly in China, and under the guise of "zoos" or "sanctuaries" elsewhere in Asia, produce countless cubs which experts say have only one purpose -- to feed the demand for illicit tiger products.

Wildlife trade investigator Steven Galster says that plans to double the tiger population are worthy but unachievable unless more action is taken at the grassroots.

"We like the goal, we think that there is just way too much time and money being spent on meetings and more discussions... and we're not seeing governments in the region put more money into wildlife law enforcement."

Galster, founder of the Bangkok-based Freeland Foundation, says some 1,800 officers from police, customs and environment departments across Southeast Asia have been trained in the past few years to combat wildlife crime.

But now "everyone is crying out for help" to fund the patrols and investigations needed to catch the "Mr Bigs" of the illicit wildlife trade, as well as their foot soldiers.

"They're saying -- we don't need more training manuals, we need money to put gas in our tanks and to pay informants," Galster says.

Loretta Ann Shepherd, coordinator of the tiger conservation alliance in Malaysia, says the blaze of publicity that accompanied celebrations for the new lunar year last month has a real chance of turning the tide.

"This is our one big chance to let the greater public know that they are the ones who hold the key at the end of the day as to whether tigers are going to disappear or not," she said.

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