

By ~~Stefano~~ Stefano 2007 Science Editor

Tiger Population Could Double in 10 Years

With just a little effort

It is the symbol of wild Asia, the king of the jungle. But now only about 5,000 tigers are to be found in the wild. One century ago, 100,000 tigers could have roamed Asia, but since then the Caspian tiger (*P.t.virgata*), Bali tiger (*P.t.balica*) and Java tiger (*P.t.sondaica*) were hunted to extinction. In 2007, the South Chinese tiger (*P.t. Amoyensis*) was included in the list of the extinct tiger subspecies. The endangered survivors are the Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) from India and neighboring areas; less than 2,000 Indochinese tigers (*P.t. Corbetti*); 600-800 Sumatra tigers (*P.t.sumatrae*); and about 350 Siberian tigers (*P.t.altaica*), from northeastern China and neighboring Russia. A new study made by the Wildlife Conservation Society and other institutions says that better management of the current protected areas in South Asia could double the number of tigers. The investigated zones were 157 reserves on the Indian subcontinent: India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. 21 reserves could harbor larger healthy tiger populations, about 58 - 95 % of the subcontinent's potential tiger capacity, calculated to be about 3,500 to 6,500 tigers. By now, the Bengal tiger, restricted to the four countries could number 1,500 to 4,000 individuals in the wild. Boosting tiger populations does not require enormous efforts: just better funding, better staff support, habitat restoration, tiger habitat and efforts to stop the poaching of the tiger and its prey. "We were happy to find that the most important reserves identified in the study already have made tiger conservation a priority," said lead author Dr. Jai Ranganathan of the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis. The research also determined how the big cats are affected by the landscape matrix surrounding the reserves, known to be crucial in determining reserves' capacity to harbor tigers. The 21 optimum areas were found to be concentrated in several areas in central India and the Indian frontier with Nepal and Bhutan and 18 of these reserves harbor tiger populations. The other 129 reserves could not sustain high numbers of tigers, still they can keep smaller populations on a long term if the surrounding habitats would experience a better management for buffering the negative impacts. WCS is now collaborating with the Panthera Foundation on a program aiming for a 50 % boom in tiger numbers in its main locations over the next decade. The "Tigers Forever" project combines a business model with hard science and has already gathered initial private funds of \$10 million. While earlier conservation initiatives focused on land cover maps, this initiative combines field data on tiger numbers delivered by novel technologies like camera trapping.