

TIGER: A NATIONAL SYMBOL OF MYANMAR



A tiger in wilderness of Taninthayi Division

A country can be proud of its floras and faunas. Rich alpine floras and tropical pine forests in the north, dry dipterocarp and mixed deciduous forests in central dry zone, and tropical rainforests in the peninsular make Myanmar unique in region.

Unlike forests in the neighboring countries, Myanmar forests remained the least disturbed. The natural forests where only a low human inhabitation is recorded cover a third of Myanmar. By 1994, the protected areas accounted for 1 percent of land. The figure increased into just under 5 percent by 2002.

Myanmar also possesses a great variety of wild animals. Among them, the tiger symbolizes many to Myanmar people and the wilderness of the country. Not only considered as the national symbol, the tiger also reflects environmental protection endeavors of Myanmar. The existence of Tiger is crucial for healthy forest ecosystem as other biodiversity and the forests itself largely rely on it.

From eastern Turkey to the Russian Far East and south to the Indonesian archipelago, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) transpired a thousand years ago. At present, Myanmar is one of the fourteen countries where tigers are apparent.

In the past, Tigers were widely spread in Myanmar according to information from surveyors, hunters, foresters, consultants and researchers. Gradually, disturbance to tigers and their prey increased and human inhabitation in once-undisturbed areas increased, leading to decline in tiger population in Myanmar. The demand for traditional medicine in Asia also prompted the commercial hunting of tigers in Myanmar.

As a primary step for defining long term plan for tigers and to identify new areas for protection, a project to develop an updated National Tiger Action Plan was introduced in 1998 with the objective of finding out tiger occurrence via direct field survey across potential tiger habitats, and apply this information to define and select areas for special protection of tigers. The Myanmar Forest Department and the Wildlife Conservation Society visualized the program .



Training workshop was provided to Forest Department and NGO junior staff in order to obtain tiger conservation and survey techniques at Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, historically famous for its tiger. For field surveys, a team of seven participants was selected from the training. Additionally, the team was responsible for conducting awareness in communities adjacent to survey areas. A set of 17 potential tiger areas are selected from large blocks of forest for taking field surveys, applying the results of a previous planning analysis for tigers, and updated maps of forest cover.

Local people were also interviewed to define possible places where tigers existed in these forest complexes. A team of trained staff implemented the presence-absence survey by using the field techniques originally applied in India and modified to use in Southeast Asia. The survey reported new and unique record of occurrence for 19 globally threatened species, 16 CITES listed species and 45 Myanmar protected species. The field survey during 1999-2002 involving more than 15,000 nights with camera traps, and more than 1,300 hours of sign searching across 5,500 square kilometer of potential tiger habitat uncovered the followings results.

Survey indicated that there are no tigers in five surveyed areas such as Alaungdaw Kathapa, Thaugdut, Mahamyaing, Nankamu, and Panlaung Pyadayin. At Paletwa and Kaladan river catchment area, Sumprabum, Khaunglanphu, Paunglaung, Momeik-Mabain, Central Bago Yoma, Rakhine Elephant Range, Saramati Taung and adjacent areas, very small population of tigers may occur or have disappeared. Probably, less than 10 individuals of tigers occur in Htamanthi Wildlife Sanstuary, Sagaing Division and surrounding areas, encountering the threat of extinction. Moderate number of tigers (less than 50) occurs in large intact forest landscape comprising Hukaung Valley and surrounding areas in Kachin State. A relatively larger (more than 50) population is believed to be existed in northern and southern Taninthayi Division. As a consequence, northern and southern parts of Taninthayi Division can be regarded as the largest intact habitats for tigers in Mainland Southeast Asia. Additionally, very low number of tigers may occur in two other areas such as Shan Yoma (Kaya/Kayin) and southern Kachin according to forestry officials even though those areas were not surveyed.

What ever the result, there is a great warning to all of us that in Myanmar tigers are threatened by poaching for commercial international trade, and poaching of its prey for local consumption and local trade.

Although full recovery is impossible in the near future, the presence of tigers can be abundance across Myanmar if proper action is taken. A National Tiger Action Plan also recommended rationale for protection and recovering of tigers. The Plan aims to increase tigers, preys and habitat.



A tiger detected by hidden camera

The period of the plan is 5 years between 2003-2007. The Plan also stands a number of targets to be accomplished germane to tiger conservation;

- Site (an area containing at least several breeding female tigers) e.g. Htanmanthi Wildlife Sanctuary is a tiger site.

- Landscape (a larger area containing several populations of females and habitat connections between the populations) e.g. the Hukaung Valley, and forest reserves in Taninthayi Division are tiger landscape.



- Tiger Conservation Units (TCU's) (areas encompassing several landscapes) e.g. the Northern Triangle TCU(60) which contains Hukaung Valley, Huai Kha Khaeng'- Tthung Yai Naresuan TCU (73) which includes Taninthayi Division).

Particularly, the implementation of the Plan will diminish major threats by bringing appropriate action for suppressing all killing of tigers, and illegal trade in tiger products. Reducing killing of tiger prey species will also benefit the Plan. In addition, the Plan also educate the local people in understanding the presence of tigers and preys for ecological system of the country. The Plan also may bring the extending of protected areas. When the Plan gets accelerated, more international cooperation will be achieved.

We can be proud of being a country, which possesses the largest population of tiger in Southeast Asia. Protecting tigers will also encourage the emergence of rich flora and fauna in Myanmar forests. The

government, the people and other NGOs are vigorously making their efforts collectively in order to tackle the obstacles of reintroduction of abundance of tigers in Myanmar forests, letting the world know the ecological awareness of Myanmar people.

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