



TIGERS ALIVE!

Fact Sheet

The largest cat of all, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) is a powerful symbol among the different cultures that share its home. But this magnificent animal is being persecuted across its range. Tigers are poisoned, shot, trapped, and snared, largely as a result of conflicts with people and to meet the demands of a continuing illegal trade in tiger derivatives and parts. On top of this, both their habitat and natural prey continue to disappear. Over the past 100 years, tiger numbers have declined by 95 per cent and three sub-species have become extinct — with a fourth not seen in the wild for over 25 years.

There are six living sub-species of tiger



Amur tiger

WWF/ALENA & ROBERT

1. The **Amur tiger** (*P. t. altaica*), also known as the Siberian tiger, is the largest of the tiger sub-species. Once found in the taiga and boreal forests of the Russian Far East, China, and the Korean peninsula, it is now restricted to two provinces in the Russian Far East, and possibly to small pockets in the border areas of China and North Korea. Although brought back from the brink of extinction and now numbering 431–529 individuals, the sub-species remains classified as Critically Endangered.

2. The Endangered **Bengal tiger** (*P. t. tigris*) is the most numerous sub-species, numbering 3,176–4,556 individuals. India is home to the largest total population of the subspecies, which is also found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China, and Nepal. The Bengal tiger inhabits deciduous forests, temperate forests, grasslands, and mangroves.

WWF/Chris Cook/ISTOCK



Bengal tiger



Indo-Chinese tiger

WWF/Carson Elizabeth KEAF

3. Dispersed widely throughout six countries (Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam), the Critically Endangered **Indo-Chinese tiger** (*P. t. corbetti*) probably numbers fewer than 1,000 individuals. It lives mostly in tropical deciduous, semi-evergreen, and evergreen forests.

4. The **Malayan tiger** (*P. t. jacksoni*) was, until recently, classified as the Indo-Chinese tiger until DNA testing in December 2004 showed it to be a separate sub-species. It was then that the Malayan tiger got its name, after Peter Jackson, the famous tiger conservationist. The Malayan tiger is locally known as harimau, Pak Belang, Datuk Harimau and Raja Rimba. They are widely distributed throughout Peninsular Malaysia (there are no tigers in Sabah and Sarawak) except for islands and certain small states (such as Perlis, Penang, and Malacca.) They are mainly found in Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak and Pahang. It is estimated that there are at least 490 adult individual tigers in the forests of Peninsular Malaysia. A habitat generalist, the Malayan tiger is also found in peat swamps although the preferred habitat is lowland Dipterocarp forests.

WWF/Malaysia/Steve Berger



Malayan tiger



South China tiger

WWF/Carson Elizabeth KEAF

5. Thought to be the ancestor of all tigers, the Critically Endangered **South China tiger** (*P. t. amoyensis*), also known as the Xiamen or Amoy tiger, has not been sighted in the wild for more than 25 years, and is believed by some to be extinct. If a wild population does remain in the moist forests of southeast China, hope for its survival is slim as there is neither adequate habitat nor prey left.

6. The smallest surviving sub-species, the **Sumatran tiger** (*P. t. sumatrae*) is Critically Endangered. Found only on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, it is threatened by poaching and large-scale habitat loss. The last 400–500 are confined mostly to protected areas in montane forests, peat swamps, and remaining blocks of lowland rainforest, which are threatened by conversion to agriculture and plantations, logging and road construction.

WWF/Fredy MERICAR



Sumatran tiger

The three other tiger sub-species, the **Bali** (*P. t. balica*), **Caspian** (*P. t. virgata*) and **Javan** (*P. t. sondaica*) tigers, became extinct in the 20th century.

The different sub-species vary in body size, coat colour and markings, with the Sumatran tiger being the smallest and darkest and the Amur tiger the largest and palest. However, markings and coat colour can overlap between sub-species and so, are not often used to differentiate. Generally, tigers have reddish-orange to yellow-ochre coat with black stripes and a white belly. Their stripes are like human fingerprints; no two tigers have the same pattern. They have short, heavily-muscled forelegs and long, sharp, retractable claws. They also have the mark of the Chinese character, Wang which means king, on their forehead. With round pupils and yellow irises (except for the blue eyes of white tigers), the night vision of tigers is six times better than that of humans due to a retinal adaptation that reflects light back to the retina.

		Sumatran Tiger	Amur Tiger
Size:	Length	2.4m	3.3m
	Weight	100-150kg	180-300kg
	Height	Around 0.9m (shoulder-leg)	
Home Range:	Female	90-190 km ²	100-400km ²
	Male	100-400 km ²	800-1000km ²

Tigers are predominately solitary creatures except for maternal bonding and during mating. They occupy non-exclusive territories that they defend against intruders of the same sex by marking with urine and scrapes at boundaries. Several tigers may follow the same game trails at different times, with a male's territory usually overlapping those of several females.

Mating season happens throughout the year, although it has been suggested that tiger reproduction, in Peninsular Malaysia, might have a seasonal peak around November to March. Litters are around two to three cubs and are born after a gestation period of around 103 days. For the next 6-8 weeks, cubs live only on their mother's milk before the female begins taking them to kills to feed. Tigers are carnivores and are specialised predators of large-hoofed mammals. In Malaysia, their main prey species are wild boar, Sambar deer, and medium-sized mammals such as Barking deer (muntjak).

Tigers have fully developed canines by 16 months of age but only begin making their own kills at about 18 months of age. Female tigers reach maturity when they are about 3 years old, a year ahead of males. When they finally leave their mother's territory – anywhere from a year and a half to three years of age – females tend to stay closer to their mother's range.

What are the problems facing tigers?

Hunting, poaching, and illegal trade

For over 1,000 years, tigers have been hunted as status symbols, decorative items such as wall and floor coverings, as souvenirs and curios, and for use in traditional Asian medicines. Hunting for sport probably caused the greatest decline in tiger populations up until the 1930s. In addition, in many areas tigers were regarded as pests that needed to be exterminated. In the early 1990s, it became evident that trade in tiger bone for traditional medicines threatened to drive tigers to extinction in the wild. Thanks to increased national and international investments in tiger conservation, trade control, and promotion of substitutes for tiger bone, the availability of tiger-based medicines has been reduced. Tigers are now protected throughout their range, and international trade in tiger parts and derivatives is illegal. However, poaching persistently feeds continuing consumer demand for various tiger body parts, with skins now appearing to be the major form of trade. This poaching is the largest immediate threat to the species worldwide. According to a report by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC, tiger poaching, illegal trade, and export of tiger bones occurs on a regular basis in India, the country with the largest populations of wild tigers, with an average of 22 cases of tiger poaching per year recorded between 1994 and 1999. A more recent TRAFFIC report published in 2004 revealed that at least 50 Sumatran tigers were poached per year between 1998 and 2002 to supply Indonesian and international markets for tiger skins and body parts.

Habitat and prey loss

Less than a hundred years ago, tigers prowled the forests of eastern Turkey and the Caspian region of Western Asia, across to the Indian subcontinent, China, and Indochina, south to Indonesia, and north to the Korean Peninsula and the Russian Far East. But growing human populations, particularly since the 1940s, have both contracted and fragmented the tiger's former range. Although extensive habitat is available in some landscapes, agriculture, clearing of forests for the timber trade, and rapid development — especially road networks — are forcing tigers into small, scattered islands of remaining habitat. Tigers need large territories, so reduced habitat means that fewer tigers can survive in the wild. In addition, isolated populations are more susceptible to inbreeding, and small islands of habitat are more accessible to poachers than large tracts of natural forest. Along with habitat loss, tigers have suffered from severe loss of natural prey populations — in particular, ungulates such as wild deer, goats, sheep, and pigs — either due to direct hunting by people or through competition with domestic animals. Large-scale habitat destruction and decimation of prey populations are the major long-term threats to the continued existence of tigers in the wild.

Conflict with humans

As tigers continue to lose their habitat and prey species, they are increasingly coming into conflict with humans as they attack domestic animals — and sometimes people. The cost for farmers can be high: for example, livestock loss due to tigers is estimated to have cost over RM 1 million in the last decade in Terengganu. In retaliation, tigers are sometimes killed by angry villagers, captured and kept in zoos or killed by the authorities as the last resort. Conflict with humans is a significant problem, particularly in Malaysia, Nepal, Bangladesh and India.

Find out more...

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Or contact us...

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