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Letter to Editor

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**Tackling the diminishing of tigers**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is heartened to learn of the Government's commitment to battle poaching by increasing manpower through a special battalion assigned to aid the Wildlife Department in the patrol of the country's jungles.

The number of wild tigers estimated to be left is only about 250. This is alarming. All efforts in the past are not working to save the tigers. At best they have only slowed the rate of their decline. The time for mere hand wringing over our disappearing forests and diminishing wildlife has long passed.

Deferring action for another decade is not an option anymore. It is time to act now and fast in order to achieve the vision to double tiger numbers in the next 12 years.

Recovering wild tiger numbers requires a multifaceted approach that includes protection of the tiger and prey, buffer zones, dispersal corridors and addressing a host of problems that must be solved to save wild tigers - including confronting poaching.

Poaching, although illegal, has remained unrelenting around the country taking its toll on already severely stressed animal populations. At current rates, several species may well go extinct in the wild within a few years. But poachers do not care - they see magnificent animals like tigers, elephants and rhinos as mere sources of cash. They not only target these megafauna but are prepared to kill other endangered animals that come their way as their aim is only to earn lucrative returns. Poaching and illegal wildlife trade are not just a local problem but also involve international syndicates using advanced technologies.

Poaching is threatening to wipe out some of the most vulnerable species from the face of the Earth.

Malaysia's harsh penalties under the Wildlife Act 2010 are meant to serve as deterrents but perpetrators are unscrupulous and routinely shrug off the prospect of years in prison knowing there is little chance of being caught. Laws are merely words on paper and the authorities, underfunded and undermanned, continue to play a cat and mouse game with traffickers who regularly run circles around them.

Poaching is an ever evolving threat and will continue to happen because it is rarely a political priority and is a very lucrative business. The current wave of poaching is carried out by sophisticated and well organised criminal networks – using night vision equipment, tranquillisers and silencers to kill animals at night, avoiding law enforcement patrols. Commercial poachers are equipped with tracking technology, high powered firearms, and covert transport routes to evade rangers within protected areas. To mitigate this, wildlife authorities require more boots on the ground to deter poachers and enforce the wildlife laws.

The Natural Resources Ministry has mulled over the shoot to kill policy which has also caused concern. However, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the poaching crisis. Anti-poaching rangers must do all they can to

avoid killing a poacher because it would be much more beneficial to catch and arrest a poacher, giving the opportunity to recover valuable information about who has commissioned them, knowing the supply chain and likely smuggling routes. Killing a poacher will achieve very little in terms of reducing the number of poaching incidents; at best it can only provide a temporary deterrent, or move gangs onto targets perceived as softer. Syndicates can easily find another person willing to take the risks.

If a poacher refuses to throw down his weapons then the rangers may fire. The shoot to kill policy should only be used as a last resort and only in self defence. But sadly, there will always be the chance that lives will be lost in the exchange of fire.

It would be much better if rangers have the necessary training and resources to make arrests, and feel confident that the laws are in place to convict the kingpins running the illicit trade.

There must be proper management of our forests with frequent patrols to stop poachers from plundering our forests and wildlife. Time is crucial to effect changes in perception and policies, and challenge consumers' desires for traditional medicines, body parts and tiger skins.

Live tigers must be seen as worth more than dead ones.

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