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Letter to the Editor

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Give Tigers More Space

Conservationists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are gravely concerned about the dwindling tiger population. As early as 2009, various action plans have been taken with the promising hope of doubling the number of tigers to 1000 by 2020. However, conservation efforts failed to stabilize or increase the tiger numbers and on the contrary plummeted to a critical level of about 150 instead.

The latest effort was the establishment of a National Tiger Conservation Task Force (MyTTF) in January 2022 to preserve the tiger population for the next ten years from 2021 to 2030.

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) is pessimistic about the expectation of a rebound in the tiger's population over a 10-year period as the population decline had been precipitous in the past despite conservation efforts.

Moreover, forests that should by law be protected to support tiger habitats are being rapidly destroyed by the demands of industry, plantations, agricultural use, road projects, construction of mega dams, logging, mining and quarrying industries.

Over the past decades a significant portion of the protected areas consisting of wildlife sanctuaries, State parks, Taman Negara, wetlands and turtle sanctuaries gazetted by Federal and State laws to ensure the country's biodiversity is safeguarded, have been lost.

Rimba Disclosure Project (RDP) disclosed a shocking revelation that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) approved 24,973.76ha – three times the size of Kuala Lumpur or nearly the size of Singapore – for deforestation in permanent forest reserves. This is in addition to a total of 86 environmental impact assessments (EIAs) involving forested land.

The environmental group claimed that the forest listings include land in forest reserves, Central Forest Spine habitat, and indigenous customary lands. The most sought-after forests are in Pahang where 27,900ha were sold, followed by Kelantan (10,411ha), Terengganu (3,631ha), Perak (202ha) – the four main tiger states – and Selangor (264ha). In a battle between the tiger and large scale, state-sanctioned economic interests, the animal's survival looks desperately perilous.

In addition to habitat, loss tigers faced unrelenting pressures from all sides. Expanding human populations results in the lack of natural prey species for tigers and also leads to human-tiger conflict that results in retaliatory killings of tigers. Other reasons for a decline in the number of tigers include injuries from snares leading to deaths, diseases such as canine distemper, poaching, and destruction of their habitat by deforestation.

As commercial interests carve up our forested land, tiger populations are becoming stranded, their constricted gene pools lead to inbreeding. Biologists have long known that fragmented populations are particularly susceptible to extinction.

There must be a shift from counting tiger numbers to maintaining tiger habitat, not simply in terms of pockets of the land but as part of the larger landscape. What is required is a combination of protected areas and forest reserves because effective tiger conservation requires a large landscape. Restoring the connectivity of forests and protected areas is important for tiger recovery and to allow the dispersal of the population into new areas.

Another issue that limits tiger population recovery is inadequate prey populations. Therefore, adequate prey is a prerequisite for tiger recovery and the preferred prey species for tigers are the wild pigs and deer which are also being hunted by the locals and poachers for their meat.

Now in a final attempt to save the tigers, there is an ambitious plan for captive breeding with a view to reintroducing them into the wild. But most tiger conservationists are sceptical of the success. A 2008 study from researchers at the University of Exeter in the U.K. found that captive-bred carnivores such as tigers released into the wild do not survive the transition, raising questions about the efficacy of captive-bred conservation efforts. Their low survival rates have been attributed to a lack of fear of humans and crucial hunting skills.

Secondly, reintroduction can only take place if there are large tracts of pristine forests where prey can flourish and the vegetation to support them. As long as habitat and prey remained intact, the tiger will be able to recover fairly.

But of utmost priority is getting rid of the problems causing the tiger's decline in the first place. All it takes is political will at the local and national levels. It needs to stop the conversion of protected forest reserves to plantations. Legislation needs to be properly enforced and provided with the allocation of resources where needed. Communities living near tigers need the education to change their attitude toward the animal.

Predicting how or whether the tiger can survive the enormous pressures facing it depends on the commitment and willingness among politicians to serve interests larger than those of the stakeholders they currently embrace. What tigers need more than anything else is space!

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