

Poaching on the decline in Royal Belum

THERE is a bit of good news for the Malayan tiger in the Year of the Tiger despite dire reports of its tiny, dwindling population numbers.

Poaching in the Royal Belum State Park, an important source area for the animal, has fallen to almost zero in the past 24 months, says Perak State Parks Corporation head Shah Redza Hussein.

The breeding of wild tigers in the park has also increased, he adds.

“Based on the number of encroachment incidents we have detected and the number of snares that have been reduced to two this year, poaching has been reduced by almost 98%,” says Shah Redza.

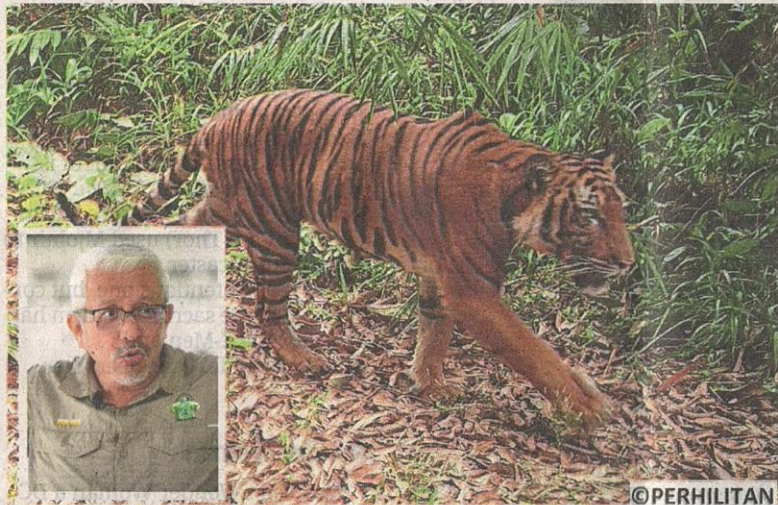
He attributes this to increased patrolling, especially by the corporation’s park rangers, the Orang Asli Menraq Patrol Unit, as well as WWF-Malaysia members.

“The Royal Belum State Park is the best protected state park in the country.”

Shah Redza says with the reduction in poaching as well as enhancement measures such as prey enrichment from the re-introduction of sambar deer in the forest, the breeding of tigers in the wild in Royal Belum has also improved.

“We recently spotted one mother with four cubs,” he says during an interview after his talk on “The Need to Protect Our Forest and Biodiversity” during a People Library event in Taman Tugu, Kuala Lumpur (see story opposite).

Showing a photo captured from a



A Malayan tiger caught on a Perhilitan camera trap. (Inset) For the first time in years, poaching incidents and snares have been reduced considerably in Perak, says Shah Redza. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

camera trap of the mother tiger and its cubs, Shah Redza says the babies’ stripes have been checked against a database to determine that they are indeed new animals (a tiger’s striping is unique, like a fingerprint).

The re-introduction of sambar deer, which is currently under a six-year moratorium from hunting beginning in 2016, has been crucial for the survival of the tigers, says Shah Redza.

“Sambar deer are the optimal

prey for tigers and the data correlates with tiger breeding.

“Preying on a wild boar or smaller animals means that a tiger can only be full for about a day but it’s up to five days for a sambar deer.

“With their bellies full, the tigers can focus on other areas, such as reproduction,” he explains.

The sambar deer re-introduced into Royal Belum is taken from Perhilitan’s (Department of Wildlife and National Park) National

Wildlife Rescue Centre in Sungkai, Perak.

The preliminary results of the first National Tiger Survey, conducted from 2016 to 2018, had revealed that there are fewer than 200 tigers in 75% of the surveyed plots.

The survey covered eight major tiger habitats in Peninsular Malaysia: in Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu.

Believed to be over 130 million years old, Belum-Temenggor is the largest contiguous forest complex in Peninsular Malaysia, and the Royal Belum Park, which is located within it, measures some 117,500ha.

Besides the Malayan tiger, the park is also home to all 10 species of hornbills in the country as well as the largest bovine, the gaur, which is bigger than the American bison and is listed as vulnerable on IUCN’s (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List.

Shah Redza says poaching in Malaysia is usually carried out by foreign syndicates that arrange for their men to fly into the country under the guise of working on plantations or in the construction sector.

“While we have a few poachers who cross borders, the majority of them stay here for up to five months, going deep into the forest, setting up wire snares and checking on them after a month.

“If they manage to snare a tiger, they would have hit the jackpot because the animal is worth around RM250,000,” he says, adding that after drugs, counterfeit goods and human trafficking, wildlife trafficking is now the fourth largest transboundary criminal activity in the world.

Local poachers, he explains, tend to only hunt smaller prey on weekends, such as wild boar or deer, for meat and stay on the fringes of the forest.

Shah Redza, who is the 2020 global recipient of the Dr Rimington Award for Tiger Conservation, says there is going to be an Asean Transboundary Heritage Park agreement for Royal Belum, which borders the Hala Bala wildlife sanctuary and the Banglang National Park in Thailand. Taken together with the two areas, the area measures over 300,000ha in size.

“We will be recognised, at least in Asean, as one contiguous area that needs to be protected. Because it’s transboundary, we have all the international agreements to work out but we have a good working relationship with our Thai counterparts,” he says. — **Sim Leoi Leoi**

StarLifestyle is running a series of articles on the conservation of Malayan tigers in conjunction with the Year of the Tiger. Join us as we report on the race to save from extinction this magnificent animal that is on our national crest.