

TIGER NUMBERS GROWING

THIS week, a Red List Assessment for tigers suggested that the species' numbers have increased by 40 per cent, from 3,200 in 2015 to 4,500 this year.

It was published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's flora and fauna conservation authority.

I have genuinely not been this enthusiastic about the species' future in decades. But let's put this into context.

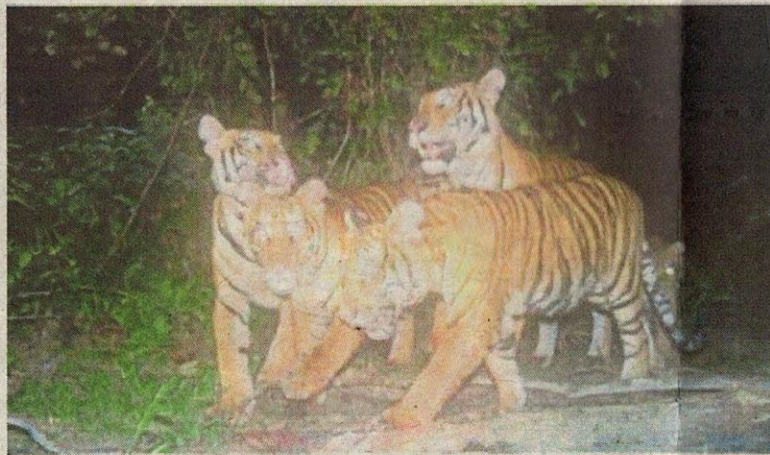
Data suggests that there are more wild tigers, but this may be due to scientists doing a better job of counting them.

Nevertheless, the take-home message is that global tiger numbers have not declined and have possibly increased since the last IUCN assessment in 2015, a remarkable achievement against stacked odds.

We certainly haven't doubled tiger numbers, but setting this target alone was a pivotal moment in tiger conservation.

To ensure tigers never again reach extinction's brink, we must develop a new 12-year tiger recovery plan that sets an equally aspirational goal, maximising international collaboration, innovation and funding.

Of paramount importance to the next tiger recovery goal is an increase



The tiger population in Malaysia has plummeted to below 150 due to intense poaching. FILE PIC

in geographic range, previously ignored by the first Global Tiger Summit, along with a surge in the global tiger population. To be clear, the tiger is still classified as "endangered". It has lost 93 per cent of its range, and tiger numbers have crashed from 100,000 a century ago.

Poaching, habitat destruction and conflict with people make recent successes fragile.

Yet, South Asia's tigers are gaining numbers, particularly in India and Nepal, where new tiger population estimates are expected any day. In

Northeast Asia, the numbers are stable in Russia and likely increasing in China, where the Russian Federation borders China.

But the remains of the fragmented tiger populations in Southeast Asia are at extremely high risk. To our benefit, the recipe for tiger conservation success is tried and true: buttressed by government and community health, safety and buy-in, we must give tigers space, protect said spaces from poaching, and scale up.

All eyes are on Malaysia to do just that, where tigers have plummeted to

under 150 country-wide due to intense poaching.

For the first time in decades, the government has committed to a concerted effort to save the species by creating an emergency National Tiger Conservation Task Force, chaired by the prime minister.

Eradicating poaching is the top priority, with an injection of 1,400 pairs of boots on the ground establishing a near-constant presence across tiger landscapes. Personnel from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, the Royal Malaysia Police, expert trackers from Orang Asli communities, army veterans and representatives from non-governmental organisations are part of this impressive alliance.

The country has also committed to new protected area developments, as well as increasing forest cover from 43 to 50 per cent in Peninsular Malaysia by 2040.

Malaysia's invigorated resolve gives me hope, as does deep-forest anti-poaching and crime science innovations extended to the two- and four-legged.

The country's first-ever K9 Tracking Unit includes a Belgian Malinois, which has, remarkably, been trained to sniff out poachers' wire snares.

Anti-poaching teams have also

pioneered developments in counter-poaching tactics and rigorous ranger training, including night-tracking and close-target reconnaissance, innovative wildlife crime analysis techniques and using novel vigilance metrics to improve ranger patrol planning.

The tactics of sophisticated poaching gangs operating in Malaysian forests for months are now being carefully studied so that rangers can track and predict poaching gang movements.

These efforts have increased the likelihood of poaching gang arrests in the Kenyir-Taman Negara core area, shortened their windows of operation and removed snares before they could kill tigers.

From 2015 to 2019, the odds of a poaching gang being detained in the region also shrunk from one in 20 to one in three, and the odds of escape from law enforcement shortened from over five to one to under two to one.

Malaysia and Thailand have further increased eyes in the wild with Poachercams, which alert law enforcement of protected area intruders in real-time and have led to the apprehension of over a dozen poachers. The tide for tigers is turning.

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