

# Give our tigers more space

THE latest effort to protect Malaysia's dwindling number of tigers is the National Tiger Conservation Task Force (MyTTF) that was established in January 2022. The aim is to increase the severely threatened population of just 150 Malayan tigers in the wild in the next 10 years. The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) is pessimistic about a rebound in the tiger population as the decline has been precipitous so far despite conservation efforts.

Moreover, forests that should be protected by law to support tiger habitats are being rapidly destroyed by the demands of plantations, agriculture, road and dam projects and the logging, mining and quarrying industries. Shockingly, permanent forest reserves totalling nearly the area of Singapore, or roughly three times that of Kuala Lumpur, have been earmarked for clearing in Peninsular Malaysia, according to a survey by independent forest monitoring initiative Rimba Disclosure Project (RDP).

RDP claims this includes land in forest reserves, in the Central Forest Spine (a vital water catchment area), and indigenous customary lands. The most sought-after forests are in Pahang, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak – the four main tiger states – and Selangor.

In addition to habitat loss, tigers face unrelenting pressure from all sides: Expanding human populations cause a lack of the tiger's natural prey and also leads to human-



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tiger conflict that results in retaliatory killings of tigers; tigers catch diseases like canine distemper from human pets; are injured, usually fatally, by snares; and are poached for the illegal wildlife trade.

As commercial interests carve up forested land, tiger populations are stranded, and constricted gene pools lead to inbreeding – fragmented populations are particularly susceptible to extinction.

There must be a shift from counting tiger numbers to maintaining tiger habitats, not simply as pockets of land but as part of the larger landscape.

What is required is a combination of protected areas and forest

reserves because effective conservation requires a large landscape. Ensuring the connectivity of forests and protected areas is important for tiger population recovery and to allow the dispersal of tigers into new areas.

Another issue that limits population recovery is inadequate prey populations, such as wild pigs and deer, which are also hunted by villagers and poachers for meat.

In a final attempt to save the tigers, there is an ambitious plan for reintroducing them into the wild. But most tiger conservationists are sceptical of the success. A 2008 study at Britain's University of

Exeter found that captive-bred carnivores released into the wild do not survive the transition because of a lack of fear of humans and crucial hunting skills.

Secondly, reintroduction can only take place if there are large enough tracts of forests where prey (and the vegetation to support them) can flourish. If habitats and prey remain intact, the tiger population will be able to recover fairly quickly.

Therefore, the utmost priority is getting rid of the problems causing the tiger's decline in the first place. All it takes is political will at local and national levels. The authorities must stop the conversion of protected forest reserves to plantations – single species plantations cannot support wildlife.

Legislation needs to be drawn up and properly enforced, with resources allocated where needed. Communities living near tigers need to be educated to change attitudes towards the animal.

Predicting how or whether the tiger can survive the enormous pressures it faces depends on the commitment and willingness of 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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