

Going, Going, Gone: The Siberian Tiger Vanishing Act

Their pelts are beautiful, especially up close, but the Siberian tiger in southern east Russia prefers its fur on its back and not in the house of wealthy families. But really what's the problem with tiger skinned rugs? In the words of many "It's already dead". However, supply and demand drives a hard bargain and the more people that want a tiger skinned rug or taxidermy Siberian tiger head plate, the more hunters go looking for this critically endangered animal.

For the most part, anytime anyone has ever come face to face with a 400lbs fierce feline, it was their last memory on the earth, or in survival cases, their worst memory on earth. Luckily for the Siberian tiger, it doesn't come into contact with people as much as its dangerous cousin the Bengal tiger. Still, attacks have happened, and in the masses eyes', who wants such a dangerous animal roaming about when it could be apart of a Russian home décor? After all it is the world's largest cat, and that in itself makes the Siberian tiger a noteworthy prize for poachers. But who do the tigers have to thank first and foremost for their population demise? To find that answer, a look at Russia's history is required.

The collapse of the USSR was devastating to Russia. Sequentially, Russia opened its borders with the southern Asian countries and smuggling went through the roof. Forestry and mining invaded into the Siberian tiger's territory along with the modern conveniences of paved roads and gas stations, things that put a stress on the tiger population. As for conservation funding, who cares? Russia had just been in a civil war and according to the government, there were bigger problems than a few dead overgrown

cats. Luckily for poachers, modern medicine had not yet reached the heads of some Chinese doctors who believed tiger body parts were important in their work. And who else should be China's lucky neighbor but Russia, home to thousands of unsuspecting victims. A single average Siberian tiger could earn a poacher more than \$30,000 in US dollars. In the early 1900s this was more than what most Russians would make in a year or two. It wasn't like the tigers were endangered, yet. However, cause and effect had yet to take place amongst the tiger population in Russia.

Speeding up a few decades, the 90s hit and for some unexplained reason, Siberian tiger populations were at a record low. The count came to a whopping total of 330-337 adult tigers putting the Siberian in the critically endangered category. Their largest populations had been pushed off into Far East Russia, and harsh climates. Finally, China came to some realizations and in 1993 made it illegal for tiger bones to be used in medicine. To soothe the EPA, China made a few announcements, encouraging pharmacies and hospitals to find alternative methods of medicine, but with little effect. The pricey poaching practice wasn't as prosperous but smuggling still continued.

So how does Russia and China reverse the trend? Siberian tigers are at a crucial stage, if the population numbers continue to dwindle, they will no longer be able to make a comeback in the wild. If the population numbers decline the Siberian tiger's status could end up reaching too low to reproduce and turn around, which means eventually they will be marked as Extinct in the Wild. It is only so long after they are extinct in the wild that they will no longer exist. There were once 8 species of tigers on the planet, since deforestation, poaching and other various environmentally destructive habits, 5

currently exist. Human kind is tip toeing around those numbers seeing as how it wouldn't take much for Siberian tiger's death to make it 4. It's time to make a change.

Recognizing the efforts of groups that have already begun to save the Siberian tiger is critical. *Since 1992, the Wildlife Conservation Society's Hornocker Wildlife Institute has conducted intensive studies of tiger ecology in cooperation with the Sikhote-Alin Zapovednik.* (WCS) The Wildlife Conservation Society is committed to saving wildlife and they understand that in order to save a species, knowledge of the species is of utmost importance. Radio collars have been attached to several members of the Siberian tiger population in order to study their social structure, land use, mortality, etc. The WCS involved in The Siberian Tiger Project has conserved off a space of land suitable to rebuild a Siberian tiger population in south east Russia. However, Russia's neighbors still present an imposing problem.

Since 1993, China's ban on illegal tiger practices has helped tremendously in the conservation of the tiger population. Lately, unfortunately, tension has arisen between China and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) concerning the ban, along with other conservation supporters. The WWF released a report last year on March 17th announcing that "Chinese business owners who would profit from the tiger trade are putting increasing pressure on the Chinese government to overturn its successful 1993 ban and allow domestic trade in captive-bred tiger parts for use in traditional medicine and clothing to resume." (Janicke) The US has supported the 1993 ban from the beginning, and because of that, the ban has stayed in place and remained fairly effective. Less than 3 percent of 663 medicine shops in China today carry tiger bone. Now the ban needs more support from other foreign nations that can throw their weight around such as Great

Britain, France, Russia, or Spain. Educating Chinese doctors and patients about modern medicine and the conservation status of the Siberian tiger is also needed. These two methods, combined, would have the strength to continue the 1993 ban and hold it in place. But a single ban will not completely undo the variety of problems that the Siberian tiger faces.

Siberian tigers in Far East Russia face similar problems of that of African elephants in southern Africa. However, African Elephants do not have the critical numbers that Siberian tigers have. To understand why, Russia must look at the tactics the government and environmental groups in southern Africa have used to maintain their elephants. To teach African tribes about potentially dangerous elephants and to protect these elephants, elephant ownership rights are assigned to local tribes that live in and around local elephant populated areas. (Dholakia) The African tribes receive money from the government to take care of the elephants, such as keeping poachers out and seeing to successful breeding. The more elephants are bred, the more money the tribe receives, but if a poacher comes and shoots an elephant, the tribe loses money, making the situation win-win. This ingenious idea allows for coexistence that tribes never thought possible. Of course, tigers are different than elephants, but the two are equally dangerous and with safe measures the tigers can be contained and handled. With this being said, Russia should mimic the practices used in South Africa. Local communities, or even distant communities should be given rights to the tigers. Once someone has ownership over something, they take more pride in it. Successful breeding of tigers should be rewarded and illegal poaching should be reprimanded monetarily directly to the people.

Still, first and foremost, the conservation status of the tiger, particularly the Siberian tiger must get out to the public. America needs less beer commercials and more conservation commercials. If information about the Siberian tiger can be reached to everyday households than perhaps the world can start to see the same effect the panda crisis had several years ago. Making the Siberian tiger seem like a worthwhile animal will inspire people to care and contribute in any way possible. Once the people care, the government will listen and tougher foreign policies can be put in place. After that the effect can grow. America is the world leader, the economic, political, and military king and the world looks up to see what the United States will do next. If America starts to care, a domino effect will be put into place, and conservation will end up as a worldwide effort. We have already seen this happen with Giant Pandas in China. Once the people started to care, the government started to care, and that is the best approach in this situation with Siberian tigers.

How many dead tigers will it take for people to realize the mess society has become? When will poachers realize that money isn't worth the price the tigers have to pay? How many animals will we have to cite as *extinct* before noticing they are all gone? It would be tragic to have the next generation of kids not know what a tiger looked like in the wild, but the path society is on will eventually lead there if changes are not made. Human beings must take the tiger to look around and realize the earth is not something to be conquered and rebuilt, but something to cherish and help grow.

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