

## Tapirs: On the Brink of Extinction – by: Clayton Suplinski

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Central America, South America, and Southeast Asia are home to a unique species called the tapir. There are four major types of tapirs: the Malayan Tapir, the Mountain Tapir, Baird's Tapir, and the Brazilian Tapir. All four of these species are classified either as endangered or vulnerable. While tapirs are not necessarily the strongest, fastest, or toughest animals in the world, they generally have few predators. Since their populations are rapidly declining, this indicates the influence of humans on the decline of the tapir population. While there are multiple causes for this, there are even more solutions that can make a difference. Knowledge of tapirs, action against environmental degradation, and enforcement of tapirs' protection will all result in less anguish within a peaceful species.

With the rapid deforestation of major rain forests throughout the world, the tapirs are running out of places to live. An estimated one and a half acres of forest are being destroyed every second. Since about one hundred and thirty-seven species go extinct every day due to deforestation, the tapirs are at high risk of becoming extinct. Tapirs generally live in old growth forests, which are becoming more difficult to find as time progresses. In addition, the tapirs depend on forest resources for food. On average, Baird's Tapirs need to eat approximately eighty-five pounds of food per day, most of which consists of fruits, berries, and leaves. With the shrinking environment for tapirs to live in, they have to struggle more to find enough food and shelter to survive through a day. Since tapirs are nocturnal, they are usually asleep as their habitat is being destroyed.

Pollution contaminating various waterways can also be deleterious towards tapirs. They tend to spend a great amount of their time near rivers where they can find soft vegetation to eat. Tapirs frequently use rivers as protection from predators. By submerging in the water, they can cool off while allowing fish to eat the parasites that attach to them. The

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increasing human involvement in the rainforests has led to much water pollution. With the waterways becoming less habitable, tapirs lose one of their most valuable resources. Along with this, deforestation has led to increased soil erosion, air pollution, and extinction of various plant species. This environmental degradation has harmed the safety of tapirs and other inhabitants of the rainforests.

Fortunately, tapirs have the abilities to avoid many predators. Their size and somewhat agile speed allows them to avoid jaguars, tigers, and crocodiles. While tapirs may be able to avoid natural predators quite well, they are no match for human hunters and poachers. Tapirs are usually hunted for food and hides. A vast majority of tapirs killed by humans are a result of poaching and occasionally food. This has drastically shrunk the worldwide tapir population and has put most tapir species on the international endangered species lists.

The most profound impact on the population of tapirs is the human colonization of the sylvan regions. This has destroyed acres of forest and polluted many rivers, forcing tapirs into difficult situations. The expansion of humans into rainforests has divided herds of tapirs and it makes them more vulnerable to predators and hunting. Division of these herds will make the probability of extinction much greater. Tapirs, once widespread throughout many forest regions, have become confined to several blocks of wilderness. Human involvement in tapirs' environments has become difficult to avoid as well. With the increasing demand for land from farmers and loggers, many people have ignored the tapirs' concerns. The intrusions in tapirs' environments have been unregulated for years and have led to dramatic declines in their population. With the few remaining havens for tapirs left and the human appetite for land being as strong as ever, numerous problems emerge.

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In order to propose solutions to these problems, it is helpful to analyze what people could do to make a change in countries that are home to the tapirs' habitats. Since deforestation has created many burdens on the wildlife of those regions, people should focus on that problem first. Deforestation is a process of clearing the land of trees mainly for the lumber. This is done primarily to feed the demand at various international markets, with the United States contributing heavily to those markets. If the demand were to fall for newly cut timber, the deforestation would slow down and that could allow the rainforests to regrow, making more habitats for tapirs. A way of getting around the dependency on new cut wood is to recycle. While this is a commonly proposed idea and only moderately effective, it will help and it should be utilized. However, humans could also use different substances that serve the same purpose as wood. Recycled plastics and adobe bricks could be used to replace wood in the construction of homes.

Human colonization and farming in the natural habitats of tapirs has also been a detriment to their population. In order to reduce the land required by farmers, people can grow more of their own food through subsistence farming. Greenhouses can be used by households for subsistence farming, thereby decreasing the amount of land occupied and reducing the demand for crops from plantation owners. Even the large farm owners can use greenhouses to improve economic efficiency and cut down on the required farming land. Studies have shown that greenhouses increase the yield threefold and improve the quality of the crops by fifty percent. The Eden Project in England is currently the largest running greenhouse in the world and is successful at growing various crops from around the world.

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Other biotechnological innovations can be utilized along with greenhouses to preserve tapirs' environments. Tunnel farming is a method that can be applicable in North American and European countries to reduce the dependency on more tropical countries for warm weather crops during the winter. The tunnels that make the system work are easy to create and are environmentally efficient. With tunnel farming systems in operation, it keeps the greenhouses at the optimal temperature for successful plant growth. Tunnel farming also helps to achieve maximum efficiency in production of crops and it helps to stabilize the economic systems in all countries throughout the world. Tapirs and all other wildlife will benefit from tunnel farming's positive effects on the environment and will help to revitalize the international tapir population.

With the increase in the use of greenhouses, tunneling systems, and recycled products, there will be less pollution from big businesses and it will clean up the vital waterways for many tapirs. Much of the water pollution that is present in rivers consists of pesticides, human garbage, and various chemicals that run into waterways during rainfall. The dependency on pesticides and other chemicals used in agriculture will fall dramatically as more greenhouses are utilized. By reducing the amount of pesticides used, increased biotechnology will decrease the chemical pollution in waterways. In order to prevent garbage from getting into rivers, everyone simply needs to prevent littering. There are many ways to accomplish this: community service projects that pick up litter, maintain a good septic system, properly dispose of pet waste, and preserve a well-functioning vehicle in order to prevent leaking car fluids. All of these steps can be used to help clean up the environment and create healthier habitats worldwide for tapirs and all living creatures.

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Projects dedicated specifically towards helping out tapirs' are also a significant method of making an international change. The Tapir Specialist Group has developed many projects dedicated to make the world a better place for tapirs. Some potential projects, some of which the Tapir Specialist Group supports, are creating posters to promote education about tapirs, helping to enforce tapir protection laws in important habitat areas, forming reserves for tapirs, increased research on tapirs and their environment, and planting various plants that help to recreate the lost environment area of tapirs. Other pro-tapir actions are already in effect. The Tapir Specialist Group leads most active movements for tapirs; however, other interest groups are strongly contributing as well.

The Baird's Tapir Project of Costa Rica is the longest tapir project in the world and involves an intricate study of tapir lifestyle; this project hopes to use this knowledge to help the endangered Baird's Tapirs. Another key international movement is the World Tapir Day. Founded on April 27, 2008, World Tapir Day is a holiday dedicated towards increasing knowledge and promoting protection of the four species of tapirs found in rainforests and mountain ranges from around the world. Increased knowledge of this species will develop into magnanimous care towards these great animals. The current laws that protect the rights of tapirs are quite ineffective, because of inefficient enforcement and lack of knowledge about tapirs. However, with major movements from civilians, the enforcement of these laws could greatly improve.

By participating in actions that protect tapirs, utilizing intelligence of these mammals, and alleviating damage from the environment, international movements will spark major changes that will safeguard this great species forever.

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