

Missing Tigers in India

The Tiger is India's national pride, and a national shame. Termed the country's National Animal, the Tiger has ceased to be the hunter in this day and age. Hunted down callously and butchered by poachers in some of India's most important tiger reserves, this majestic creature now faces extinction.

In India, where about half of the planet's remaining 5,000 wild tigers live, tigers face a number of threats, especially from a growing human population. More than a billion people live in India today, and development is rapidly expanding into what was once largely tiger territory.



Majestic cats

Hundreds of years ago, there were many more tigers on Earth than there are today. An estimated 40,000 tigers used to live in India, an area that once included modern-day Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other neighboring lands.

From the beginning, tigers inspired awe, respect, and fear in people. And with good reason. An adult male Bengal tiger may weigh more than 500 pounds.

Early in the 20th century, tourists from around the world flocked to India just to shoot tigers. By the late 1960s, however, most visitors couldn't find any. A rough count at that time turned up fewer than 2,000 tigers in all of India.

Losing tigers

Without tigers to keep deer populations in check, for instance, deer would multiply out of control and eat up all the vegetation in an area. That could lead to flooding or soil erosion. Silt could fill rivers that people depend on for irrigating their fields.

Losing tigers would also be a shame because the animals are so breathtakingly beautiful and impressive. "If you see a tiger in the wild, you will fall in love

You forget everything when you see a tiger, every movement is phenomenal. They are powerful, swift, cunning, smart, charming. They are the most attractive things in the world."

The animals are now so important to India's national identity that the government started a program called Project Tiger in 1973 to put aside land just for the protection of tigers. Today, there are 27 tiger reserves, covering more than 37,000 square miles.



At the beginning of the 20th century, there were literally tens of thousands of tigers in India's forests. Their numbers began to fall when tiger hunts by Indian kings and nobles, as well as the ruling British elite became an outrageously popular sport. People flaunted their tiger skins and stuffed heads as a mark of their 'Shikar' prowess.

About five years ago, international tiger specialists warned that India was losing one tiger every day to poachers, who sold the animal parts to China and Southeast Asian countries to be used as medicinal elixir. Tiger bones, claws and penis are touted to cure though scientifically rubbish particularly problems of male erection and boost physical vitality. The Economic developments of these regions increased the demand for these tiger organs, which apart from being the raw material for drugs became dining-table delicacies.

India appears to be doing precious little to check the decimation of its wildlife, and instances of large-scale poaching have been coming to light with sickening regularity. Late last year, the Sariska Project Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan reported that not one of its 26 big cats there could be traced. Early this year, another Project Tiger Reserve, Ranthambhore, also in Rajasthan, faced a similar crisis: the reserve's figure of 47 tigers has been disputed by wildlife experts, who said that the number could not be more than 15.