



PROTECTING SUMATRAN TIGERS

BY FAITH KHONG

Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, president of Fauna & Flora International (FFI), tells *MillionaireAsia* about Sumatran Tiger Conservation and why there is a need to fight for these iconic creatures.

Held inside Burkill Hall, amidst the lush greenery of the Singapore Botanic Gardens was the Fauna & Flora International (FFI) Singapore Conservation Circle Dinner, where we had the privilege of meeting Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien.

FFI, which was founded in 1903, is the longest established international conservation body and registered charity to exist worldwide. Its Conservation Circle aims to bring current and potential FFI supporters together to assist and aid in FFI's many conservation projects.

Facing Extinction

Sumatran Tiger Conservation, which is one of the many conservation initiatives by FFI, was also a topic of discussion at the Conservation Circle. These tigers, which are the smallest surviving tiger subspecies, have now been categorised as "Critically Endangered" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

According to recent surveys conducted by FFI, there are an estimated 500 Sumatran tigers left in the wild. The fact that these animals are on the verge of extinction is a hard pill to swallow, but these shocking statistics have prompted organisations like FFI to take action and counter the problem at hand.

For over 20 years, FFI has spearheaded projects and conservation efforts in Sumatra. The organisation works in three major landscapes – Kerinci Seblat National Park (1.4 million hectares), Aceh (3.5 million hectares), and since 2013, Riau (0.5 million hectares) – which is home to more than 60% of Sumatran tigers left in the wild.

Efforts Paying Off

The problem of any species in the ecosystem being faced with extinction is always difficult to handle, and results of efforts to improve the situation are never instantaneous. However, recent statistics have shown that FFI's efforts over the past 20 years have started to pay off.

In many places where FFI have focused their conservation efforts, Sumatran tigers are no longer on the decline. In fact, recurrent records of tiger cubs are proof that breeding has been taking place. Although Sumatran tigers are still considered critically endangered, these positive changes are extremely encouraging and are likely proof that FFI's strategies are working.

Sustainable Livelihood Is Key

Princess Laurentien, who advocates and is dedicated to the conservation of the world's animal species and ecosystems, believes in coming up with sustainable approaches as solutions to counter problems such as poaching, which remains rampant in wildlife habitats in many countries around the world today. This is one of the strategies that FFI has been using all these years.

Why is this the case? "It is ultimately about the money," the Princess said. Despite certain conservation laws, people still resort to poaching because it is their main source of income.

According to Dr Matthew Linkie from FFI, the illegal wildlife trade is valued at US\$19 billion each year. Rhinoceroses, elephants, pangolins, and of course, tigers, are the most prized species of animals.

Most Sumatran tigers are hunted for their skin and bones, which are popularly used in traditional Asian medicine. Apart



Conservation efforts, such as forest ranger patrols, are in place to further prevent the decline of the tigers.

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FFI team setting camera traps in the forest to monitor the state of the tiger population.

from poaching, the lives of these tigers are also put at risk because of a loss of habitat due to the expansion of small holder farm and exotic plantations.

Therefore, Princess Laurentien believes that the solution is to change the mindset of the people, by encouraging and introducing sustainable solutions. “It is about coming in and working with communities, and teaching them to use their natural assets in a totally different way. It is about making them realise that poaching is a short-term way of life, and only then will they stop,” she explained.

No Mean Feat

Although it is a seemingly simple solution that will aid in the preservation of wildlife, implementing these measures as part of conservation efforts are far from easy. In some cases, alternative livelihoods have to be developed, while other times, FFI has to work with governments to make sure that law enforcement is trained by professionals to help keep the situation under control.

For example, FFI has trained more than 500 dedicated national park and community forest rangers, who conduct anti-poaching forest patrols, working with local informants to remove tiger snare traps. So far, this strategy has seen the removal of 5,500 snares. The informant network has also helped in the investigation and arrests of tiger poachers and traders.

In addition to this, FFI has formed another network to record and report illegal logging activities. To date, 138 illegal loggers have been prosecuted.

Despite such law enforcement in some areas, conservation still continues to be a sensitive, and even dangerous matter. In Congo, Africa, there has been a case of someone getting shot because he got in the way of a poacher. It is evident that conservation in itself remains a complex issue.

Other Approaches

Besides enabling the help of governments to assist in the enforcing of laws, FFI also uses other forms of approaches in its cause to save the Sumatran tigers.

Conservation teams carry out human-tiger conflict mitigation, where they prevent the unnecessary killings of wild tigers. Wild tigers may occasionally wander out of the forested areas and into farmlands. Rather than allowing concerned and frightened locals to take matters into their own hands, FFI deploys rapid response units to be on scene to handle these situations. So far, in Aceh and Kerinci Seblat, conservation teams have successfully responded to 158 of such incidents by catching the tigers in snare traps and releasing them back into the wild after rehabilitation.

FFI also makes sure to monitor the population of the tigers as a means of assessing the impact of their conservation management intervention. Cameras have been set up in and around the forest to better observe the tigers, and obtain information on the population trends of these wild cats.

Focus On The Asia-Pacific Region

FFI works on over 140 projects in over 40 countries and five continents. The Asia-Pacific region, in particular, has been recognised as important to global conservation because of its incredibly rich biodiversity.

For over 20 years, FFI has focused its efforts in Sumatra. Besides the conservation of the Sumatran tigers, FFI also protects other threatened wildlife such as clouded leopards and elephants, and works in countries such as the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, China, Australia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, and has its operational hub in Singapore.

Singapore has been selected by FFI as the place to develop its Conservation Circle because the city-state is the regional hub for global leadership in biodiversity conservation. Opportunities in Singapore are also aplenty; FFI sees the future generations here as being the ones that will make the organisation’s green aspirations come true.

“I really believe that the young generation are closer to knowing what to do, but we need to give them a voice in the world. That, for me, is very important,” Princess Laurentien concluded. ▲