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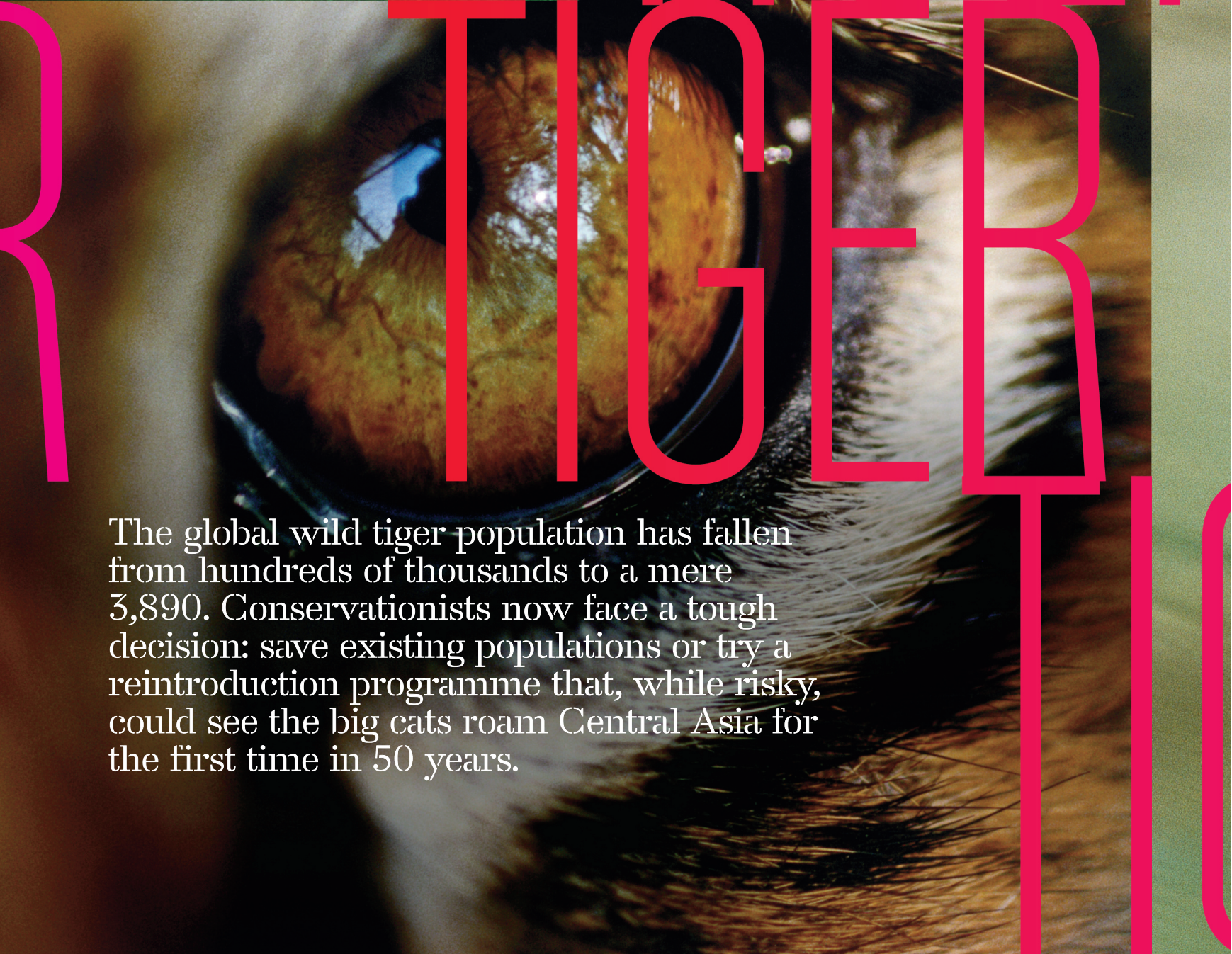
GEORGE CONDO – ERDEM – ALI & NINO

"TIGERS PAY A HEAVY PRICE FOR THEIR ROLE IN HUM

Words by JAMES PARRY



AN FANTASY; THEY ARE A CASUALTY OF SYMBOLISM."



The global wild tiger population has fallen from hundreds of thousands to a mere 3,890. Conservationists now face a tough decision: save existing populations or try a reintroduction programme that, while risky, could see the big cats roam Central Asia for the first time in 50 years.



Powerful, beautiful, mysterious. Is there any creature as compelling as a tiger? British poet William Blake clearly thought not. "Tyger Tyger, burning bright," he wrote, "In the forests of the night; What immortal hand or eye, could frame thy fearful symmetry?" Blake's famous poem was published in 1794, when hundreds of thousands of tigers prowled from eastern Turkey through the Caucasus, Persia, India and south-east Asia as far as China and the far east of Russia. Feared and admired in equal measure, these apex predators – bigger even than the lions with which they once shared the western and central parts of their range – historically played

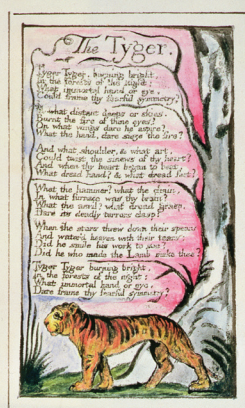
BY THE TURN OF THE PRESENT CENTURY WILD TIGERS HAD DISAPPEARED FROM 96 PER CENT OF THEIR FORMER RANGE, DUE TO ILLEGAL HUNTING.

a paramount role in folklore, popular culture and the decorative arts.

From the 5,000-year-old rock carvings of tigers in the Helan Mountains of Inner Mongolia to the tiger mosaics adorning the façade of the 17th-century Sher-Dor Madrasah in Samarkand and the tigers that dominate the present-day coat of arms of Malaysia, the king of the cats has exerted a talismanic influence over mankind. Human leaders have often sought to project the tiger's qualities as their own. In an inevitably unequal battle of the mighty, tigers were the preferred hunting quarry of kings and other princely rulers, perhaps nowhere more so than in India. Mughal art is

full of scenes depicting tiger hunts, a tradition adopted with bloodthirsty enthusiasm by the British when they governed India. The record for the most tigers killed in a single hunting trip is held by King George V and his party, who shot 39 tigers in a 10-day expedition to India and Nepal in 1911. The Maharajah of Kotah even had a Rolls Royce specially modified for tiger hunting, complete with a mounted machine gun and cannon. "Tigers pay a heavy price for their role in human fantasy," wrote Ruth Padel in her lyrical book *Tigers in Red Weather*; "They are a casualty of symbolism."

The largest of all the wild cats stood little chance under such an onslaught. Of the nine recognized tiger subspecies, three became extinct during the 20th century thanks to indiscriminate shooting, trapping, poisoning and habitat destruction. The island race of Bali tiger was the first to go, hunted into oblivion by the late 1930s. The Caspian tiger was next, those from Tajikistan and Iran in 1958–59, and from Azerbaijan in 1964 (a later record from Turkey is usually discounted). The last Javan tigers were seen in the 1970s. A fourth subspecies, the South China tiger, is believed to have gone extinct in the wild within the past 20 years, but thankfully a small number of animals remain in captivity so the genetic strain continues. For wild tigers elsewhere, the situation had become very bleak by the turn of the present century. They had disappeared from 96 per cent of their former range, under intense pressure from illegal hunting. By 2011 the total global population of wild tigers was estimated to have fallen to just 3,200 individuals.



TIGER BONES, CLAWS, TEETH, EYEBALLS AND WHISKERS ARE ALL CLAIMED TO HAVE HEALING PROPERTIES.

With the hunting of tigers banned in all countries by the 1970s, illegal poaching was the main culprit behind such a dramatic collapse in numbers. Even in supposedly well protected areas, such as the national parks of India, tigers were quietly disappearing. Poacher snares and other types of trap were stripping forests of the big cats, fuelled by demand from China in particular for the use of their body parts in traditional medicine. Tiger bones, claws, teeth, eyeballs and whiskers are all claimed to have healing properties for a range of ailments from insomnia and rheumatism to malaria and meningitis, despite there being no supporting scientific evidence. During 2000–14, the body parts of more than 1,500 tigers were seized by wildlife law enforcement officials worldwide. With a fresh mature tiger carcass worth \$50,000 or more on the black market, it is not difficult to see why poachers are so bent on killing them.

A possible glimmer of hope came in April this year, when conservation groups announced that the world's estimated population of wild tigers was assessed at 3,890, up 20 per cent in five years. Although some of this increase can be attributed to better recording methods, more effective anti-poaching



This page, clockwise from top left: Henri Rousseau's *Dream* (1997) by Frances Broomfield; *The Tyger*, plate 43 from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1802-08) by William Blake; a young Bengal tiger; a Siberian tiger running in snow; *The Tiger at Bay* from *Oriental Field Sports* (1807) by Samuel Howett; *Tipu's Tiger* (1790) by Indian School; the Malaysian coat of arms; George V, Prince of Wales, front row, third from right, poses with the spoils of a hunt in India, 1906. Background image: *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)* (1891) by Henri Rousseau.



Henri Rousseau


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Meanwhile, plans are afoot to return the tiger to Central Asia, where the Caspian (or Turanian) tiger was driven to extinction more than half a century ago. DNA analysis of museum specimens from Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan has revealed that the Caspian population was virtually identical genetically to the Siberian tigers further east and that rather than two separate sub-species these were in fact one; their once contiguous range possibly ruptured by climate changes or human activity. Now conservationists are discussing the possibility of reintroducing tigers (using Siberian animals) to Kazakhstan, where a feasibility study by the Worldwide Fund for Nature has identified the presence of adequate habitat in the basin of the River Ily and along the southern shores of Lake Balkhash.

A close-up photograph of a tiger resting in a field of tall, green grass. The tiger is lying down, with its head turned slightly to the right, looking off-camera. Its orange fur is covered in dark black stripes, and its white underbelly is visible. The tiger's eyes are yellow and focused. The background is a dense thicket of green grass and foliage, creating a natural, wild environment.



Lack of suitable prey is one of the biggest problems for wild tigers. In situations where their natural food sources are in thin supply, tigers will turn to other options. Domestic livestock can make for easy pickings, which naturally brings tigers into immediate conflict with farmers. Attacks on humans are rare, but do occur, usually when tigers are injured or starving. The presence of a plentiful and healthy prey base is therefore paramount to their survival. Globally, it is estimated that there is enough intact forest habitat remaining to enable at least a doubling in overall tiger numbers. More reintroductions are being planned, both within countries such as India, which still have tigers but where some populations have become isolated, and those – such as Cambodia – where tigers have died out.



This page, clockwise from top: Ussuru, a Siberian tigress, in the Primorye Safari Park, Skhotovo, Russia; Tiger Necklace (1904) by Lalique; a Bengal tiger crosses a dirt track in Bandhavgarh National Park, India; Ussuru, as before; a Bengal tiger at Bandhavgarh National Park; the Tipu's Tiger Head Sword, used in India during the Battle of Seringapatam, 1799, on display at the Clive Museum, Powis Castle, Wales; *The Political Conference of the SPD in Crisis* (1931) by John Heartfield.



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