



SAVING  
RUSSIA'S  
**BIG**  
CATS

*The strength and might of the tiger is also its undoing due to the traditional Chinese belief that the animal has medicinal qualities that help treat chronic ailments.  
James Parry joins an anti-poaching patrol in the Russian Far East*

*The recent spike in the illegal market for tiger body parts for use in traditional Asian medicine has taken the animals to the brink*



THE DAPPLED LIGHT AND dense vegetation make it hard to spot anything with certainty, but what I'm looking

for is quite distinctive: orange and black fur, stripes, white whiskers and a penetrating stare. Everything feels right. I'm in a vast tract of undisturbed forest, close to where there was a sighting only a few days ago. Yet try as I might, I can't summon up a tiger. 'Never mind,' says my companion, conservationist Sergei Bereznuik. 'Even the guys out on patrol only see one every few months or so.'

Bereznuik is director of the Phoenix Fund, a small non-governmental wildlife conservation charity working in the eastern Russian province of Primorsky Krai, an eight-hour flight from Moscow through seven time zones. The Fund's main focus is the region's endangered population of big cats, which live at very low densities over a huge area, and face a range of pressures, from poachers to speeding motorists. The local forest environment, known as the 'taiga', is home to the largest race of wild feline, *Panthera tigris altaica*, or the Siberian tiger.

Except that we are not, as Bereznuik makes plain, in Siberia. 'This is Amurland, part of the Russian Far East, and so we call them Amur tigers.' Bereznuik's home region has an exotic, frontier-style allure to the outside visitor. Landing at Vladivostok's swanky new airport after flying over a seemingly endless carpet of trees, the city presents a modern and affluent aspect. The elegant downtown streets and designer stores are very much part of the bold new Russia, complete with luxury condominiums offering majestic views over the Sea of Japan.

Once out of the city, it all changes. The landscape becomes increasingly untamed and the old Russia prevails, with local villagers living largely from their smallholdings or commuting into the city to seek work. The taiga reasserts its dominance and extends over the rolling hills as far as the eye can see. 'The tigers are out there,' says Dale Miquelle of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), as we contemplate the view. 'But keeping tabs on them is hard work.'

Tigers are in retreat everywhere. Of the nine recognised subspecies, three – the Bali, Caspian and Javan – are already extinct and one – the South Chinese – is probably so. It is estimated that worldwide there are currently fewer than 4,000 wild tigers, down from 100,000 or so at the turn of the 20th century. Decades of hunting, habitat loss and a decline in prey have all played a part in the downward spiral, but it is the recent spike in the illegal market for tiger body parts – so-called 'derivatives' – for use in traditional Asian medicine that has taken these magnificent animals to the brink.

We have been here before. For the Amur tigers, an early low-point came during the 1930s when demand for tiger skins and young cubs for zoos and circuses almost wiped out the entire population. Only 20 to 30 animals were thought to survive in the wild. State protection followed and by the 1980s the population had increased to 600, with itinerant tigers even spotted in the suburbs of Vladivostok. However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a breakdown in



**TOP:** a young Siberian (Amur) tiger. Poaching is the principal threat to the survival of wild tigers. **LEFT:** Sergei Bereznuik, a Russian conservationist and ecologist, committed to saving Russia's tigers. **BELOW:** Bereznuik and scientist Galina Salkina inspect a tiger skin at the Lazovsky Nature Reserve Headquarters. Skins such as this go for up to US\$20,000 on the black market



law enforcement, and poaching became rife. Tiger numbers fell sharply until the creation by the Russian government in 1994 of a new protection scheme, Inspection Tiger. Crack anti-poaching patrols – often made up of seasoned ex-soldiers – were given the authority to handle suspected poachers robustly and to secure the last tiger refuges.

That work continues today but on a more diverse and sophisticated level. Bereznuik's Phoenix Fund collaborates with international agencies such as the WCS, Worldwide Fund for Nature and the Zoological Society of London to support the anti-poaching patrols, which are organised into a military-style operation. Teams of between four and nine rangers move on foot and in vehicles through their designated areas, using handheld GPS units to record their movements, while recording data such as the interception of trespassers and poachers, and the confiscation of firearms, traps and snares. This information is added to a database, which is then used to identify patterns in poacher behaviour.

Bereznuik invites me to a progress meeting between the four anti-poaching teams that work in the 1,210km<sup>2</sup> Lazovsky Nature Reserve, home to an estimated eight to 12 tigers. Team performance is evaluated by a chief inspector. The rangers are tough characters and the discussion is animated, not least because the most successful team over the previous three months will receive a bonus. Such incentives are an integral part of a complex system of protection that appears to be paying off, with a recent overall reduction in poaching.

Even so, policing every corner of such vast and difficult terrain is impossible and it's believed that several tigers are still taken by poachers each year. The overall Amur tiger population is currently estimated to number about 450 animals, but as many as 75 per cent of these may live or roam regularly outside the protected areas within which the anti-poaching patrols largely operate. Knowing exactly how many tigers live in the reserves relies more on technology than on actual sightings. Camera traps allow ecologists to monitor tiger numbers and movements, with individual animals recognisable by their unique stripe patterns. The cameras also reveal how many wild boar and deer are present. Poaching of these animals is also a concern, as it removes the tigers' main source of food. As a result, starving tigers will sometimes wander into villages in search of dogs and domestic livestock, with often disastrous consequences.

CREDIT FOR SERGEI PICS ABOVE  
Rolex Awards/Marc Latzelna



CREDIT FOR PIC BELOW  
Rolex Awards/Marc Latzelna



**LEFT:** Sergei Bereznuik uses camera traps to try to capture images of the elusive tigers. Here he fixes a trap onto a tree with Zoological Society of London scientist Linda Kerley.

**OPPOSITE & RIGHT:** the Amur tiger is the largest of all big cats with males reaching over three metres (11 feet) from nose to tail

After the meeting I chat with some of the rangers about what their job involves and why they do it. 'I enjoy the challenge of living and working in the forest,' says Kyrill Sverdlitsky, a 20-year-old forestry student in his first few months on patrol. 'Most people of my age are more interested in working in the city. They feel disconnected from the forest and, because they never see a tiger, there's a real risk they might not care whether the tigers survive here or not.'

The potential estrangement of young people from their surroundings led the Phoenix Fund to start an environmental education programme. The next day I visit a secondary school in the town of Slavyanka and meet Natalia Drobysheva, one of several teachers working closely with the Fund. 'Of course, tigers are always popular with kids,' she explains, 'but we are also teaching them about the value of the forest as an ecosystem, and why it and other habitats should be protected.' There are encouraging signs that this approach is making a difference, with one pupil organising the first-ever community beach clean-up in the town and an estimated 4,000 schoolchildren marching through the streets of Vladivostok for last September's Tiger Day Festival.

There are signs the grown-ups are listening too. Even rarer than the Amur tiger is the Amur leopard, of which only 30 to 40 survive in the wild. A recent highway upgrade saw a quiet dirt road passing through prime leopard habitat transformed into a dual carriageway, which threatened to split the tiny population in two and brought the real risk of leopards dying in collisions with vehicles. Following intense lobbying from the Phoenix Fund and other agencies, the authorities agreed to tunnel a section of the road so the animals can in theory pass above, unhindered. 'We're still not happy about it, but it's a less bad scheme than it was,' says Dale Miquelle.

*'Time is running out and we need to make local people proud that they share their homeland with such amazing animals'*



Then, last November, came some welcome news from the courts. A hunter who was claiming he'd shot a tiger in self-defence was convicted of intentionally killing it, fined the equivalent of US\$18,500 and sentenced to 14 months' disciplinary labour. Such convictions are rare and this is the most severe sentence yet given, so it has been welcomed by conservationists. There are also encouraging signs that the possession of tiger derivatives – not currently illegal in Russia – will soon be made a criminal offence.

Meanwhile, Bereznuik's work saw him awarded one of the prestigious Rolex Awards for Enterprise for 2012. The luxury Swiss watch house has been honouring individuals in science, health and the environment since 1976, and the accompanying cash prize of 100,000 Swiss francs is being used by the Phoenix Fund to provide more equipment for the anti-poaching patrols and educational awareness programme. Bereznuik is clear about what approach he believes will work: 'We must use a combination of technology and education to save the tigers. Time is running out, and we need to make local people proud that they share their homeland with such amazing animals.'

It's undeniable that spending time in places where tigers and leopards roam is special. I may not have seen one, but standing on a bridge and being told that, a few weeks earlier, a tiger and her two cubs had been spotted walking quietly along the riverbed below was more than enough for me. ■■

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