

HUNTERS HELPING THE SIBERIAN TIGER

How Hunters In Russia are Saving the World's Largest Cat

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In the taiga forests of the Russian Far East lies the last stronghold of the Siberian tiger. Historically, they roamed Manchuria, Mongolia, eastern Russia and Korea.

Today, they exist only in Russia's Amur territory on the Sea of Japan.

Siberian tigers were ruthlessly slaughtered by a bounty program in China and unchecked poaching in Russia in the early 20th century. In recent years, demand for tiger parts used in Chinese medicine has accelerated poaching.

Yet today, to the surprise of some people, one of the tiger's greatest allies are hunters.
The Siberian Tiger Project

For nearly two decades, Dr. Dale Miquelle, an ecologist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has been tirelessly slogging through bitter winters and mosquito-infested summers in the Amur region to save the tiger from extinction.

In addition to studying the great cats, he has helped broker a unique partnership with Russian hunters.

"Local people kept telling me 'it's the hunters that you need to reach,' and I finally got it," said Miquelle, director of the Russian program. "They're by far the largest stakeholder group in the region."

Hunting is a strong tradition in Russia's Far East, where more than 60,000 licensed Nimrods take to the forests each autumn.

Not surprisingly, the tiger is well entrenched in big game hunting lore. Swapping stories of hairy encounters with the striped cat over a bottle of vodka was a hunter's pastime here.

Tiger Conservation and Local Hunters

Tiger hunting was banned in 1947. Game laws were administered by the central government in Moscow and penalties were severe for anyone caught poaching. Then in 1995, the Kremlin privatized wildlife management. Local hunting cooperatives were responsible for implementing seasons, harvest quotas and enforcement.

This was where Miquelle saw an opportunity. By training hunting leases to effectively manage elk, deer and boar, both tigers and hunters would benefit.

"We're not necessarily telling people they have to save tigers, we're helping them manage wildlife effectively," said Miquelle.

One of the WCS's main partners in this endeavor has been Montana wildlife artist John Banovich, who first came to Russia in 2002 to study the tiger as an art subject.

"When you immerse yourself in the study of a wildlife subject, you learn the issues surrounding it and want to help make a difference," said Banovich.

A hunter himself, Banovich led a team of nine American sportsmen to Russia to work with hunting leases. They emphasized to local managers the great potential of sustainable hunting and the importance of the tiger in the ecosystem.

"There's a real disconnect between hunters and conservationists," said Banovich. "Even though hunting has proven to be one of the most effective tools in wildlife management, few groups are willing to work with hunters. Being a hunter and a wildlife artist gives me great access to both sides."

Only 10-15% of tiger habitat occurs within reserves. Hunting leases are the only other areas of protection, so it's vital to the tiger's survival that hunters tolerate their presence.

International Hunters

The WCS is promoting “tiger-friendly” hunts. These involve sportsmen coming to Russia to hunt big game on approved leases that are committed to tiger conservation.

License and trophy fees fund the management of game and habitat that tigers depend on. More importantly, a boar or Sika deer hunt in a typical lease will cost over \$10,000 US. This is major money in the Russian economy.

If lease managers are making money because their lands are “tiger-friendly,” they’ll protect tigers and increase big game herds to keep the clientele coming back.

The project got off to a rocky start. It was tough for the WCS to find a booking agent sympathetic with their goals. Most Russian outfitters were taking their clients to the Kamchatka for brown bear hunts and had no interest in the Far East. Others already had good business on leases where there were no tigers.

Eventually, they connected with Russ Smith Worldwide Hunting Adventures. Smith, who operated in Russia, was very interested in tigers himself and happily began working with the WCS.

The Tiger’s Future

A survey conducted in the winter of 2004-2005 revealed approximately 430-500 tigers in the Russian Far East. Including 25-30 tigers south of the Chinese border and a possible remnant in North Korea, the world population now numbers 550 at maximum. Miquelle remains optimistic.

“Of all the countries in Asia that harbor tigers, I think they have the best chance here in Russia,” he said.

Swelling populations in India are making life hard for the Bengal tiger, once considered the “safest” subspecies. The harsh elements of Siberia give tigers a shield they lack in the fertile subcontinent.

“The fate of the tiger will be with the local people,” said Banovich. “Do they see [live tigers] as an asset or a liability?”

In an impoverished land like Russia, it will indeed be up to the hunters, who depend on wild places, to save the tiger from extinction.

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