



Baring teeth: the Sumatran tiger is in constant danger from poachers, illegal land clearing and declining prey

the tigers that live deep within the darkness of the forest. That was 16 years ago, and she has been here fighting for the animals and jungle ever since.

“I think it is remotely possible that there is the odd tiger in Java, but they would most likely be escapees from private collections – some very foolish people think they can keep tigers as pets.”

Leopards, Martyr says, are also often mistaken for tigers when seen in the wild.

gers and leopards in zoos before.”

Of the eight subspecies of tiger in the world, Indonesia was home to three. The Bali and Javan are now extinct. It is difficult to determine how many Sumatran tigers remain, but estimates range from 300-400.

Kerinci is probably the most suitable remaining tiger habitat in all of Indonesia, but it is beset by deforestation caused by illegal encroachment of small rice cultivators or huge palm oil plantations, which



Crime scene: Pakis village (top) where the alleged tiger attack took place; The Pakis village police force with Chief Dedhi Purwono (right)



INDONESIA

On the prowl for answers

A journalist hunts for the extinct Javan tiger, while the Sumatran tiger struggles to avoid the same fate

By **Tate Zandstra**

“Remember the Java situation because it raised a lot of interest, and many more questions than answers.”

A cup of sweet coffee steams in conservationist Deb Martyr's hand and a cool, early morning breeze carrying the fresh

scent of the jungle blows into her living room in Sumatra's Kerinci Seblat National Park.

“The alleged victim,” Martyr continued, “was unknown, and very few women go climbing volcanoes alone, even in Java.”

In November 2008 reports emerged of

a woman attacked and killed by a tiger in a national park in Java. Shortly thereafter, fresh tracks were recorded by authorities, who confirmed that they were indeed instigated by tigers. The reports were shocking, not so much because an anonymous hiker was killed by a tiger in a rural area,

but because the Javan tiger has been considered extinct for the last three decades.

Could there still be tigers in Java, and was a tiger really responsible for the hiker's death? Perhaps Deb Martyr, one of the foremost conservationists in Sumatra, could provide some answers. Martyr, a London newspaper reporter who came to Kerinci pursuing a story, fell in love with the beautiful volcanic terrain and

“Indonesian is a language which can, on occasion, be less than specific ... lay people are often prone to calling any big cat *harimau* (tiger).”

Still, the rumoured sightings persist. Martyr knows a man who, while hunting pigs in East Java only months ago, swears to have seen a tiger, which killed one of his dogs.

“He's an educated guy, and he's seen ti-

are preceded by clear-cut loggers. The tiger itself is targeted heavily by poachers who catch the cats in snares, then sell their skins, teeth, claws, and bones for upwards of \$2,000 on the black market.

The next day I ride through the misty river valleys and over the brilliant sunny peaks of Kerinci with one of the Tiger Protection and Conservation Units employed by Martyr and Fauna and >

Photos: Tate Zandstra (2); Don Paulson



Crouching tiger: Villagers channel the spirit of the tiger in a Silat Harimau ritual, Silat Harimau is a martial art indigenous to Sumatra

Flora International (FFI). We stop in a valley on the park's edge to check live tiger traps. The rangers show me tracks of a female with two cubs striding off into the bush.

"Human health and livelihood is at risk ... not just tigers." Zoe Cullen says at FFI headquarters. "There is a mosaic of patchy deforestation ... It's about a species, but also what that species represents; deforestation."

Cullen works with local organisations to educate villagers on the consequences of destructive land use. The thick forests of Sumatra, she explains, trap rainwater and allow it to trickle slowly into rivers and lakes. Deforestation and palm oil and coffee plantations which are eroding the edges of national parks alter the hydrology of the areas, causing flooding, then drought.

"The encroachers come from far away, but the people who have been here for generations have some awareness of land management." The most important work foreign NGOs can do, she says, is to educate local political and environmental groups.

For an example of Sumatran environmental degradation look no further than Jambi. The provincial capital is an eyesore of open sewers and new construc-

tion. Diesel spewing logging and cement trucks rumble by day and night on traffic choked, treeless streets.

Pak Didi Wurjanto, the head of ecotourism in Jambi province, is a busy man and gets directly to the point of our meeting. "Right now, everyone regards the tiger as a threat ... I have limited manpower, limited cages, and a limited budget ... I can't catch every tiger in the forest."

Just that morning, Wurjanto tells me, a government official called and said that he has a tiger which he wants Wurjanto to take off his hands, having found that an adult tiger is an expensive and dangerous status symbol.

Wurjanto has to work entirely within diplomatic channels, he explains to me. "I have proposed to the minister ways to save the tiger; if rich people want to keep them, the government will give permis-

sion, but they must provide tourist facilities, and allow the government to monitor the tiger's health."

Wurjanto says that there are also people keeping tigers in both Java and Sumatra illegally. "There is no other clear and clean areas to put the tiger where we can protect them from poachers and cause people to see them as part of the ecosystem, not the enemy."

Large and cool under the sprawling canopy of trees, Jambi's zoo is filled with the sounds of birdsong. Two Sumatran tigers live within a grassy and shady, but painfully small enclosure. There were three tigers here previously, but last year someone snuck in at night and shot one of the cats, skinning it on site.

It is depressing to think of Wurjanto's prediction that one day there will be no wild place for these beautiful and majestic animals to roam.

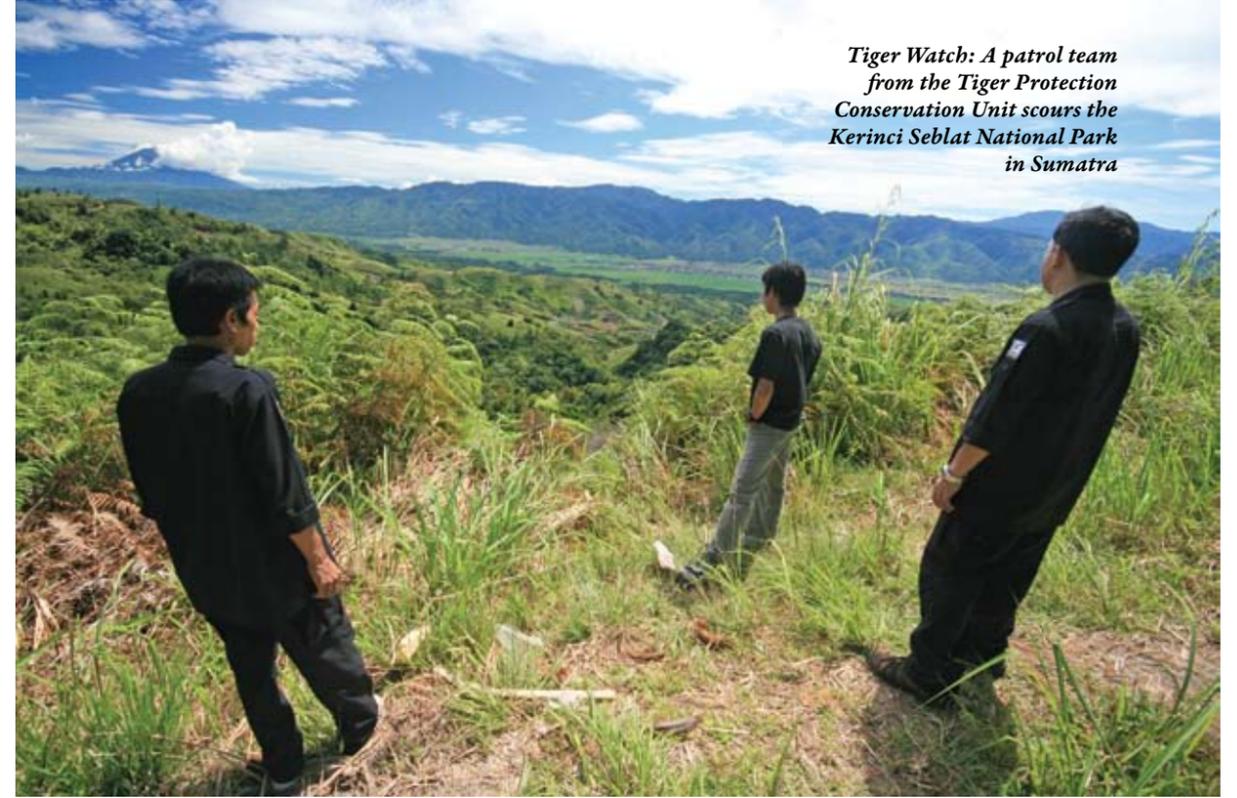
Yogyakarta, Java was once the seat of power for the Hindu Majapahit Empire, which ruled the island prior to the advent of Islam. Most tourists come here to see



Skin trade: (far left) Seized tiger furs bound for the Chinese market; the Tiger Protection and Conservation Unit (TPCU) check traps

the temple complexes left by the long extinct civilisation. A couple of hours away by motorbike tower the twin volcanic peaks of Merapi and Merbabu, the site of the alleged attack.

Christian Awuy leads search and rescue operations in the area, and knows the terrain better than anyone. The volcanoes are treacherous, and his expertise is constantly required. Awuy sits down in his office, a



Tiger Watch: A patrol team from the Tiger Protection Conservation Unit scours the Kerinci Seblat National Park in Sumatra

Kulon (northwest Java) I saw a tiger, just for a couple seconds, but it was definitely a tiger."

Around the massive lower slopes of the volcanoes lies Pakis, the village where the tiger attack is supposed to have taken place. At first unsure what it is that I am looking for, the police warm up soon enough and, laughing, begin showing photos of bodies pulled out of the jungle nearby.

The cause of death, as well as the identity of the "tiger attack" victim, says Chief Dedhi Purwono, remains officially unknown. People go into the jungle and just don't come back sometimes. Chief Purwono suspects that the death was the result of an injury sustained somewhere in the bush. Unable to hike back out, the woman may have died of exposure, then consumed partly by scavengers.

When I show him the newspaper article which blamed the death on a tiger, he only laughs, saying that it was a rumour begun

by the woman who found the body, and certainly not supported by the police.

It seems an anticlimactic end to a mystery, and a reminder that the Javan tiger is extinct, but the episode has also pointed to people working hard to ensure the Sumatran tiger does not suffer a similar fate.

Such a feat will require a massive change in land use practices, and a huge effort on the part of Indonesian authorities to stop illegal land clearing and poaching of not only the tiger, but the prey it depends upon.

The tide is shifting, however. Wurjanto says one government official recently incinerated his tiger pelts because of his guilt. Increasingly, Sumatrans savvy in politics and science are joining the conservation movement and educating people about the consequences of killing tigers and destroying the ecology on which everyone depends.

With enough protection, funding, and patience, Deb Martyr says tiger populations can recover all over Sumatra. ■

Photos: Tate Zandstra (3); D. Champaigny/Wildlife Conservation Nepal