

LIFE&TIMES GREEN

Cat Walkin Pahang

To mark the recent Global Tiger Day, **Aneeta Sundararaj** writes about moves to raise awareness on saving these majestic creatures

IN the last three years, whenever a tiger conservationist is asked about the dwindling tiger population in this country, chances are he or she will answer with a depressing: "When the tiger becomes extinct."

Not one of them seems to be optimistic enough to say, "If the tiger becomes extinct."

They also believe that in the last 100 years, the world has lost 97 per cent of its wild tigers. Throughout the world, it is reported that there are about 3,200 tigers left. In fact studies conducted between 2010 and 2013 suggest that there may be only between 250 and 340 wild Malayan tigers left. Today, this number is less than 250 and there are no pockets of forest in Malaysia with an estimated population of 50 or more mature tigers.

As of June 23 this year, the Malayan tiger was officially listed as "Critically Endangered" in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of threatened species, the world's most comprehensive source of information on wild animals and plants, and the threats they face. In other words, the Malayan tiger faces a bleak future.

There is, however, some hope, explains Ashleigh Kivilaakso Seow. The affable 59-year-old is a volunteer guide with the Malaysian Conservation Alliance For Tigers (Mycat). This alliance of NGOs (consisting of the Malaysian Nature Society, Traffic

Southeast Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Programme and WWF-Malaysia) is dedicated to the cause of wildlife conservation with a special focus on the critically endangered Malayan tiger.

This year, Mycat marked Global Tiger Day on July 29 with the launch of the Save Malayan Tigers' campaign, in partnership with Royal Selangor. The world's largest pewter-maker will commit 20 per cent of sales from a selected list of Royal Selangor tiger-related items like tiger pendants, figurines, plaques and cufflinks to Mycat.

CAT WALKERS

One of the projects that the funds will be channelled towards is called Cat Walks. Cat Walk leaders like Ashleigh will take people on guided weekend hikes through poaching hotspots at the Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor, Pahang. His primary responsibility is to decide the route taken and ensure the safety of the participants. A Cat Walker can be anyone who is

Malayan Tiger by Jake Leong-MYCAT.



Wire snare by Kae Kawanishi of MYCAT. Nylon spring snare. PICTURE FROM MYCAT



Ashleigh Seow CAT Walk Leader.



"We were there to make noise. This trip was for us to 'be' here. We were here for a cause."

Nigel Gan Tze Ho

have been detected at the main poaching hotspots, thus supporting the premise that the presence of volunteers does indeed disrupt poaching activities. After all, in that time, more than 600 people from 27 countries have patrolled more than 1,000km of our rainforest.

"Just as importantly, the Batek people, an Orang Asli group, are dependent on the same environment for their livelihood and their cultural traditions. Protecting the tiger saves not just wildlife but people and cultures too," says Ashleigh.

He adds that there is a concerted effort among many government bodies to do more for tiger conservation. Indeed, on June 4, the National Biodiversity Council, the highest decision-making body for biodiversity chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, approved a survey called National Tiger Survey. The survey, which will cover all the forests throughout the peninsula, will find out where the tigers are, how many are left, and where we should focus our resources to protect this animal and their habitats.

"Hopefully," he adds, "these decisions will soon be translated into a significant allocation of human and financial resources to turn these plans into reality."

In any case, for Nigel, he describes his foray into the jungle as quite refreshing. He concedes: "It was not as bad or as interesting as I thought it would be. Nothing happened. But I realised that we played a part. After the walk, I felt that we'd done something."

Would he go on another Cat Walk? Nigel ponders a while before finally replying: "It was definitely an experience. I mean, when we woke up in the morning, there was a mist that covered the land. Wow! This isn't something we see in the city. Ever." He pauses, then adds, his face breaking into a smile: "Yeah, I wouldn't mind."

more than 18 years old with average fitness. The walk will depend on a variety of factors from when the trail was last checked to the suitability of the route for the group in question.

In Ashleigh's experience, the ablest walkers are over 35. He says: "They have experience, are more safety conscious, are able to assess situations calmly and know how to pace themselves."

The aim is for walkers to appreciate the tiger's wild habitat and understand it is important to save tigers. In addition, funds raised will go towards maintaining the 24-hour Mycat Wildlife Crime Hotline (019-356 4194). All this means that these Cat Walkers become additional "eyes and ears" to the Wildlife and Forestry Departments in reporting instances of wildlife and forestry crime.

Perhaps, Ashleigh's funniest and somewhat ironic experience was when a group of poachers joined the Walk under the mistaken assumption that the Cat Walkers were a group of local villagers.

The Royal Selangor employees too have been participating in Cat Walks since 2012. One such participant is Nigel Gan Tze Hoe, the group's communications manager.

Admitting that he's not very adventurous, the lively 30-year-old says that when he was first told about the Cat Walk, he was reluctant and curious, in equal measures. Still, his boss informed him that to fully appreciate the efforts that Royal Selangor was making to raise funds for Mycat, it was necessary for Nigel to go on a Cat Walk.

"I am a cockroach-fearing, Internet-reliant, fast-food manufactured child," says the self-proclaimed city boy. "I mean, I knew it wasn't going to be an epic journey. Just a day trek in the jungle. No hot water. No air-

cond. No easy access to food. The place we were going to wasn't even a two-star hotel."

But as Nigel had little choice in the matter, he went about preparing for the trip by buying things on the checklist like long pants, high socks, hydration packs and other required items.

REALITY CHECK

Having psyched himself up for the trip, just about a month ago, Nigel joined 12 others from Royal Selangor and made the journey to what he called the base camp, which was actually a chalet in Taman Negara. After resting for the night, the six-hour trek into the jungle began at 9am the next day.

Half-way into the hike, it occurred to Nigel that he wasn't there to spot animals.

"It was such a huge reality check," he says. "We didn't see a single animal. No wildlife. No birds. No tapir. I thought we would see a family of elephants by the river. Nothing. I didn't even see monkeys."

He finally understood that the purpose of the trip was to look for traps placed in the jungle by poachers. "We were there to make noise. This trip was for us to 'be' here. We were there for a cause."

Ashleigh explains that the presence of people in the jungle, alerts poachers to their presence and deters them from going into the jungle. Cat Walkers look out for snares or traps, not just those set specifically for tigers. The snares can be for tapirs, elephants, sambar and many other animals. The dangerous thing about snares is that they are indiscriminate and trap any

animal that wanders across its path. The types of snares and traps can range from a thick wire noose targeting large mammals, a nylon noose to trap ground birds to bamboo cages to trap birds.

SEEING RESULTS

However, Ashleigh confides that he has no special interest in tigers or elephants for that matter. "Both are umbrella species," he says, explaining that this "means if they and their habitats are protected then many other animal and plant species which inhabit the same area will thrive as well".

As a result of the constant vigilance of Cat Walkers, fewer threats



Figurine of a tiger from Royal Selangor.



Tiger-related items for sale from Royal Selangor.