

LIFE & TIMES GREEN

Tigers, our heritage

Protect the tiger or it will vanish from our jungles forever, writes
Aneeta Sundararaj

IT'S not easy. Dr Mark Darmaraj, lead research scientist for the Tiger Conservation Programme at WWF-Malaysia, still has a hard time containing his emotions when recollecting the time he was part of a team that came to the rescue of a Malayan Tiger.

The tiger, shares Mark, had its paw caught in a snare. "When I looked into its eyes, the tiger seemed scared and ferocious at the same time."

It was also the first time he saw a tiger shed a tear. Tragically, this tiger died several days later from its wounds. The 35-year-old adds: "It's a sad thing to realise that another human being can cause so much pain to an animal that just wants to live its life."

Despondent for some time after this, Mark's sense of hope for conservation efforts to save the Malayan tiger was renewed a few weeks later when he found a female tiger and

three cubs in the same area. He adds: "It'll be far worse for tigers if we don't do what we do. However, we have to realise that what we are doing is just fire-fighting. If the nation is serious about saving the Malayan tiger, conservation efforts need to be stepped up."

With the aim of increasing awareness on the plight of the Malayan tiger, Maybank has announced its support for the Maybank Wild Tiger Run which will be held at Bukit Jalil Park on Nov 9.

TIGERRUN

The Tiger Run is being organised by the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (MYCAT), an alliance of the Malaysian Nature Society, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Programme and WWF-Malaysia. MYCAT is supported by the Department of Wild-

What: Tiger Expo organised by MYCAT in conjunction with the Maybank Wild Tiger Run.

When: Nov 2 and Nov 3, 2013

Where: Ground Floor of The School @ Jaya One.

life and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia.

The Tiger Run will consist of a 10 kilometre competitive race and a 3km fun run. Participants can collect their Race Packs at the Tiger Expo on the ground floor of The School @ Jaya One on Nov 2 and 3.

During this Tiger Expo, members of the public will hear about the life of tiger biologists, learn more about what is being done to save the Malayan tiger and how they can help.

Eliza Mohamed, Head of Corporate Affairs for Maybank, pointed out that tigers have a special cultural sig-

nificance as it is part of our country's emblem.

In addition, she says: "In recent years, Maybank has doubled its efforts to support the cause of environmental conservation. Since 2010, we have contributed close to RM1.5 million to support conservation efforts. Our employees have been a part of some of these community engagement programmes, talking to people who live in communities surrounding wildlife habitats."

SAFEGUARD OUR TREASURES

"What is the biggest challenge in sav-

ing the tiger?" Dr Kae Kawanishi, 45, general manager of MYCAT, pauses before she begins, saying that the government does have the will to conserve Malayan tigers.

Under the new Wildlife Conservation Act, convicted tiger poachers, traders or consumers will be fined a minimum of RM100,000 and jailed up to five years. Anyone convicted of being in possession of a snare will be fined up to RM100,000 and/or jailed up to three years.

Furthermore, together with conservation groups, in 2008, the Malaysian government developed



Pix by Chris R Sheperd, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia



Tigers play a critical role in our ecosystem. Pix by Dr Kae Kawanishi, MYCAT



The tiger and her cubs. Pix by Azlan Mohamed, WWF

the National Tiger Conservation Action Plan. Its ultimate aim is to have 1,000 wild tigers by 2020. It was a great beginning.

Says Dr KAE: "We are appointed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to help it keep track of the progress of NTCAP implementation. Unfortunately, every single year, Malaysia as a whole has received the 'F' grade."

Tigers, says this mother-of-one, are much sought after for their bones, which are used in traditional medicine; meat, which is served as a delicacy in wild meat restaurants; and teeth, claws and skin, which are believed to have curative or magical powers. Naturally, poaching remains the number one threat to the Malayan tiger.

The point made is this: The market for products made from the Malayan tiger is mostly outside Malaysia. There is a huge market overseas (mainly China) and if Malaysians do not make a greater effort to protect the wild tigers we still have, soon there will be none left like in the Indochinese countries neighbouring China.

How do Malayan tigers end up in China?

Many hands including foreign poachers and Malaysian middle men are involved in the huge wildlife trade syndicate. Dr Kae, who completed her post-graduate degree in wildlife ecology and conservation, says: "From the biogeography and conservation perspectives, Peninsular Malaysia is like an island. Look at places like Bali, Java and Singapore. They all lost tigers and many other wildlife species. I want the general public to realise that this isn't someone else's problem."

Here's an analogy of what Dr Kae's saying: say you have intruders coming into your home, killing your family members and stealing prized



"Unfortunately, all over Peninsular Malaysia, the tiger has already lost about 90 per cent of its preferred lowland forests..."

Dr Kae Kawanishi

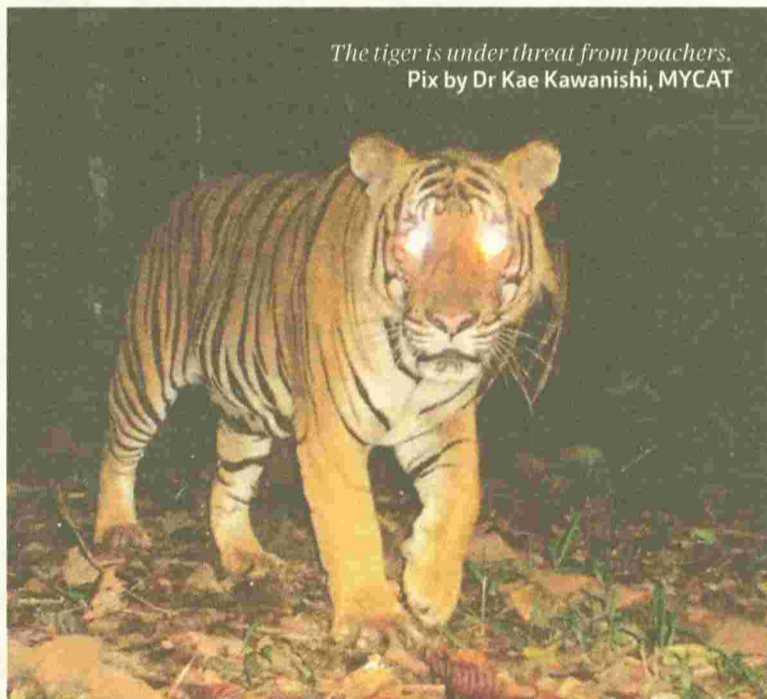
heirlooms year after year, you would certainly make an effort to beef up the security of your house to prevent anything else being stolen and to protect your family. Leave it to the authorities to arrest and punish the criminals, but it is your responsibility to safeguard your treasure together with your neighbours.

Likewise, when we have a few individuals abusing and stealing the treasure and heritage of all Malaysians, we must make an effort together to protect them from continuing harm.

As if this is not bad enough, the number of wild Malayan tigers dropped from 3,500 in 1950s to 500 in 1990s.

Today, the number is even less. This horrifying statistic is magnified by the possible repercussions of losing all our tigers. As Eliza points out: "Tigers play a critical role in our ecosystem. As the top predator, they control the population of its prey species and when its numbers face a dramatic change, it throws the entire ecosystem out of balance. Since humans are a part of this ecosystem, any changes will inevitably affect us as well."

While explaining some of what Dr



The tiger is under threat from poachers. Pix by Dr Kae Kawanishi, MYCAT

Kae and her team do, she says that tigers have an innate behaviour to avoid humans. "They're not waiting at every turn in the jungle to pounce on you; in fact, it's a dream for many conservationists to see a tiger in the wild," says Dr Kae.

With a soft smile, she admits that this is a dream that has not come true for her; it was not a wild Malayan tiger that she saw in 1995.

"We were in the Russian forest and I was the one holding the video camera for the Nat-Geo film crew. When we saw a Siberian tiger coming towards us, I was so awestruck that I forgot to roll the film. But in the past 15 years of working in Malaysia, I've never seen one although in many instances, I knew I was being watched. It is an indescribable sense of the mystery of the jungle."

THE CATWALK

One of the topics that MYCAT will talk about during the Tiger Expo is how anyone can help protect tigers directly in the jungle through a programme called Citizen Action For Tigers (CAT), currently funded by the US government and Malaysian Building

Society Berhad. Through CAT Walks, ordinary people walk the jungle and deter poaching by their presence and also by finding and deactivating snares.

Another would be their efforts to highlight the importance of "tiger corridors" as they connect our fragmented forests in Peninsular Malaysia.

Dr Kae explains it in the following way: As the apex predator of the jungle, tigers need large expanses of forests with plenty of prey (such as deer and wild boar) to survive. If their habitat, and tigers and their prey, are protected, the Malayan tiger will do well in large protected areas and sustainably managed production forests. Unfortunately, all over Peninsular Malaysia, the tiger has already lost about 90 per cent of its preferred lowland forests to development. Their remaining habitats in sub-optimal quality continue to be threatened by deforestation and forest fragmentation due to more plantations and road constructions. The roads create barriers to tigers' movements and allow poachers to gain access into what used to be inaccessible forests.

STAY AWAY FROM:



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Wildmeat



Wildlife souvenirs

An example is the tiger corridor in Sungai Yu, near the western border of Taman Negara in northern Pahang. The narrow stretch of remaining forest is the only link between the Greater Taman Negara and the Main Range forest landscapes. Based on MYCAT research findings, the government built a "green" highway, in particular, creating three viaducts that allow wildlife to continue to cross the road underneath. This is where the public are taking part in CAT Walks led by MYCAT.

The message is clear: The Malayan tiger is our shared national heritage. If we do nothing now to protect it, we will — not may — lose it.