WCS study finds potential to double tiger numbers in South Asia

November 5 2007

Researchers at the Wildlife Conservation Society and other institutions declare that improvements in management of existing protected areas in South Asia could double the number of tigers currently existing in the region.

The study appears in the most recent edition of the journal *Biological Conservation*.

Specifically, the study examined 157 reserves throughout the Indian subcontinent—comprising India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. It found that 21 of the protected areas meet the criteria needed for large healthy tiger populations. Further, the study noted that these protected areas have the potential to support between 58 percent and 95 percent of the subcontinent's potential tiger capacity, estimated to be between 3,500 to 6,500 tigers. In the absence of reliable data to produce a reliable estimate, tiger conservationists say that the big cats may currently number between 1,500 to 4,000 animals in the four countries combined.

The small improvements to increase tiger populations cited in the study include better funding, increasing staff support, restoring tiger habitat, and stepping up enforcement activities that focus on preventing the poaching of tigers and their prey.

"We were happy to find that the most important reserves identified in the study already have made tiger conservation a priority," said the lead author Dr. Jai Ranganathan of the National Center for Ecological

Analysis and Synthesis.

The tiger is endangered in all of its natural habitats, a range stretching from India down into Southeast Asia as far as the island of Sumatra, and in the Russian Far East, and is listed as endangered according to both international and U.S. law.

The study is one part of WCS' continuing efforts to conserve the tigers and their wild lands wherever they survive. On a broader scale, WCS is currently working with the Panthera Foundation on an ambitious new program that calls for a 50 percent increase in tiger numbers in key areas over the next decade. This new initiative, called "Tigers Forever," blends a business model with hard science, and has already attracted the attention of venture capitalists who have pledged an initial $10 million to go to specific projects to support the initiative.

Unlike earlier efforts to set tiger conservation targets that were mostly based on land cover maps, this study for the first time incorporated field data on tiger densities derived from the pioneering camera trapping work of WCS researcher Dr. Ullas Karanth and colleagues. The study also assessed the impact of the landscape matrix surrounding the reserves using tiger population models based on measured and expected tiger densities.

The researchers found that landscapes surrounding protected areas play a significant role in the ability of those reserves to support tigers. The 21 areas most capable of supporting large numbers of tigers are concentrated in a few regions in central India, and the Indian borders with Nepal and Bhutan. Eighteen of the protected areas currently contain tiger populations.

The remaining 129 protected areas do not have the potential to sustain high numbers of tigers, but nonetheless these reserves could be capable

of containing tigers over the long term if the landscape surrounding the reserves are better managed to reduce negative impacts.

Though no truly accurate global numbers exist, conservationists guess that 5,000 tigers remain in the wild. About 150 years ago, 100,000 tigers may have roamed throughout much of Asia according to some guesses.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society