

Tigers disappear from Himalayan refuge

July 2 2008

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is alarmed by the dramatic decline of at least 30 percent in the Bengal tiger population of Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in Nepal, once a refuge that boasted among the highest densities of the endangered species in the Eastern Himalayas. The recent survey of April 2008 showed a population of between 6-14 tigers, down from 20-50 tigers in 2005.

The Government of Nepal made a low-key announcement on July 1 based on the results of a long-term camera trap study conducted in large part by WWF. Officials identified poaching as perhaps the major cause of tigers disappearing from this protected area. Ironically, armed poachers have been photographed by the very equipment set up to capture tiger images.

"The loss of tigers in Suklaphanta is undoubtedly linked to the powerful global mafia that controls illegal wildlife trade," said Jon Miceler, managing director of WWF's Eastern Himalayas Program. "The evidence suggests that Nepal's endangered tigers are increasingly vulnerable to this despicable trade that has already emptied several Indian tiger reserves—clearly, this is symptomatic of the larger tiger crisis in the region. We need a stronger, more sustained response to this issue in order to protect the future of tigers in the wild."

Suklaphanta shares a porous international border with India, allowing for easy and untraceable transportation of wildlife contraband. Unlike poaching of other species like rhinos where only the horns are removed, virtually no evidence remains at a tiger poaching site because all its parts

are in high demand for illegal wildlife trade.

In May, two tiger skins and nearly 70 pounds of tiger bones were seized from the border town of Dhangadi. Just last month, two separate raids recovered tiger bones being smuggled by local middlemen through the reserve.

"With only 4,000 tigers remaining in the wild, every tiger lost to poaching pushes this magnificent animal closer to extinction," said Dr. Sybille Klenzendorf, director of WWF's Species Conservation Program. "Tigers cannot be saved in small forest fragments when faced with a threat like illegal wildlife trade—this is a global problem that needs the concerted effort of governments, grassroots organizations and all concerned individuals."

WWF is committed to working even more closely with local communities and various government bodies in Nepal and India to tackle illegal wildlife trade. Activities ranging from improved community-based anti-poaching operations to entrenched informant networks and better-equipped rapid response teams are being strengthened.

Source: World Wildlife Fund

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