

Save the tiger: Pressure mounts for tougher action

January 24 2010, By MICHAEL CASEY , AP Environmental Writer



In this photo taken Jan. 20, 2010, two adult male tigers look on at Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yannasampanno Forest Monastery in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. The monastery and its Buddhist Monks dedicated to what has become a wildlife sanctuary for tigers. Estimates for the number of tigers in the wild has fallen in the past decade to somewhere between 3,600 to 3,200 according to the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society. Many of the tigers at the Thai temple are the cubs of parent tigers that have been killed in the wild. (AP Photo/David Longstreath)

(AP) -- After trudging through the wilds of western Thailand for several hours, the forest rangers thought they were finally onto something: the distant sound of crunching leaves.

Automatic weapons drawn, the five Thais crept forward, hoping to catch a [tiger](#) poacher. It turned out to be a banteng, a wild cow, which disappeared into the woods.

But all in all, the absence of illegal hunters was good news, said ranger Sakchai Tessri. "When we passed before, we would always run into poachers." Now he felt their room for maneuver was narrowing.

"In the old days," he said, "they would spend many nights in the forest for poaching. Now they just come in, shoot, grab and go quickly."

The 6,400-square-kilometer (2,500-square-mile) Huai Kha Kheang and Thung Yai Wildlife Sanctuaries on the Myanmar border represent a rare success in the struggle to save the world's dwindling tiger population.

Funded by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, the increased patrols, armed with the latest technology, have scared off poachers and helped stabilize the tiger population of more than 100, along with animals such as the banteng which they prey on.

Elsewhere, tigers are in critical decline because of human encroachment, the loss of more than nine-tenths of their habitat and the growing trade in tiger skins and body parts. From an estimated 100,000 at the beginning of the 20th century, the number today ranges between 3,200 to 3,600, most of them in Asia and Russia.

Now hopes are rising that 2010 will see a turning point.

Ministers from the 13 countries with tiger populations will hold a first-ever meeting Wednesday through Friday in Hua Hin, [Thailand](#) to write an action plan for a tiger summit in September in Russia, where Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been championing the survival of the tiger.

The purpose of this week's meeting is to elicit promises of more money for conservation and to persuade countries to set [tiger population](#) targets. It is being organized by the Global Tiger Initiative, a coalition formed in 2008 by the World Bank, the Smithsonian Institute and nearly 40

conservation groups. It aims to double tiger numbers by 2020.

"The bleeding continues," said the World Bank's Keshav Varma, the initiative's program director. "I'm not sure if these poachers are feeling the heat of regional and global and national action. They seem to be operating rather freely."

David Smith, a tiger expert at the University of Minnesota who will attend the meetin action "has got to be now. We are at that critical stage."

But at least one skeptical activist is skipping the meeting.

"All we have gotten from ministers and heads of state is rhetoric," said zoologist Alan Rabinowitz, president of Panthera, a New York City group that works to conserve the 36 species of cats. "Putin loves tigers but (Siberian) tiger numbers are plummeting in the Russian Far East."

The Wildlife Conservation Society estimates the number of Russian tigers in the wild at 300 - down from a 2005 estimate of 500.

Past efforts in tiger countries have been

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