

Myanmar triples size of northern tiger reserve

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A Bengal tigress Noah Noah plays with its newly born cub in Myanmar's Yangon Zoological Gardens in 2005. Myanmar has created the world's biggest tiger sanctuary by more than tripling an area designated as a reserve for the endangered big cats, according to conservationists.

(AP) -- Myanmar has tripled the size of the world's largest tiger reserve in an effort to save the endangered species, which now numbers less than 3,000 in the wild, a conservation group said in a statement seen Thursday.

The entire Hukaung Valley - a remote area of northern Myanmar about half the size of Switzerland - is now a protected tiger area, the government announced Tuesday.

"Myanmar now offers one of the best hopes for saving tigers in

Southeast Asia," said Colin Poole of the U.S.-based [Wildlife Conservation Society](#). "The newly expanded protected area in the Hukaung Valley will be a cornerstone of tiger conservation throughout this iconic big cat's range."

As many as 100,000 tigers roamed the wilds of Asia as recently as 100 years ago, but in the past few years alone some tiger populations have been completely eliminated, mostly by poachers and human encroachment on their habitat.

Illegal hunting in the Hukaung Valley as well as gold mining and large-scale agriculture have decimated wildlife, and as few as 50 of the big cats remain in the area, the society said, noting the valley had the potential to hold several hundred tigers.

"Scientists and [conservationists](#) believe that tigers can make a comeback if the most critical threats to their existence, poaching of the cats themselves and their prey, are addressed effectively and immediately," the statement said.

The Myanmar government designated 2,500 square miles (6,475 square kilometers) of the valley as a wildlife sanctuary in 2004, and Tuesday's increase brings it to about 8,450 square miles (21,885 square kilometers).

Conservationists and government officials are meeting this fall at a "[tiger summit](#)" in St. Petersburg, Russia, to make firm commitments to double the number of tigers in the wild by 2022.

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