

13 nations sign declaration meant to save tigers

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Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, center, prior to his meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, in St.Petersburg, Russia, Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2010. The Chinese Prime Minister will be taking part in the International Tiger Forum. Demand in China poses the greatest threat to tigers in the wild and organized crime runs the illicit trade in the world's largest felines, international experts said. (AP Photo/Dmitry Lovetsky)

(AP) -- Officials from the 13 countries where tigers live in the wild have signed a declaration Tuesday aimed at saving the iconic big cats from extinction.

The new accord stipulates that the nations will strive to double the [tiger population](#) by 2022, crack down on poaching and illicit trade in tiger

pelts and body parts.

Tigers once roamed most of Eurasia from the Tigris River to Siberia and Indonesia. But in the past century, the number of countries that are home to tigers has dropped to 13 from 25, while three of the nine tiger subspecies have become extinct. Experts say there are now only about 3,200 tigers left in the wild.

The nations - most of which are in Southeast Asia - agreed to preserve and enhance tigers' habitats and involve local communities in their conservation efforts.

"The goal is difficult, but achievable," Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin told the participants of the "Tiger Summit" in St. Petersburg.

Russia's Far East is home to Siberian tigers, the largest tiger subspecies. Putin has bolstered his image by posing with a cuddly cub and placing a tracking collar on a full-grown female.

The number of tigers worldwide has plunged some 95 percent over the past century. The Global Tiger Recovery Program estimates the 13 nations countries will need about \$350 million in outside funding in the first five years of the 12-year plan.

Many of the countries with tigers, such as Laos, Bangladesh and Nepal, are impoverished, and saving tigers may depend on sizable donations from the West. The nations will be seeking donor commitments to help finance conservation measures, the agreement said.

"It is difficult to solve the problems of [wildlife conservation](#) in these countries," Putin said.

He said Russia could help revive [tiger](#) populations in neighboring

countries such as Iran and Kazakhstan.

Russia was the only nation where the number of tigers has increased in recent decades - from several dozens in 1947 to some 500 now. Putin said.

Russian wildlife experts say, however, that Siberian tigers are still endangered. Their pelts, bones and meat are prized in traditional Chinese medicine, and some 100 of them are killed annually to be smuggled to China, a senior inspector from a natural preserve in the Primorsky region said.

Rampant deforestation of cedars contributes to massive migration of animals and forces tigers to forage villages and farms, where they often get killed, Anatoly Belov said.

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