

Tigers may still come roaring back

November 4 2013, by Ashley Mooney



Credit: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Although tigers have been threatened with near extinction for decades and some extinction narratives in the 1990s predicted they'd disappear by 2000, they might actually be making a comeback.

Indian conservationist Ullas Karanth thinks tigers can be saved, and the

key to saving them is optimism.

"Conservation is about being optimistic, but rationally optimistic," said Karanth, the Wildlife Conservation Society's director of science for Asia and founding director for the Centre for Wildlife Studies in India. He spoke at Duke Oct. 22 for the Ferguson Family Distinguished Lectureship in the Environment and Society.

At one point, tigers occupied about 30 present-day countries, but that range has shrunk by 93 percent to a mere 115,000 square miles of forest, Karanth said.

As India continues to rise through developmental pathways, Karanth said it is crucial to preserve land for all [animals](#), not just tigers. India is about a third of the size of the United States, but has four times as many people. As India's economy continues to grow, urban areas continue to creep into and to destroy wildlife habitats.

"When I say tiger conversation, I mean all this," he said referencing all of the animals that coexist in the [tiger habitat](#). "In India, the idea that you can have space for nature and that other creatures need space is accepted. It provides a positive platform on which you can build more knowledge."

Wanting to save tigers isn't enough, he said, adding that [conservation](#) must be science driven.

Since Karanth began studying tigers in 1986, his program has grown from a small tiger study to a "pretty substantial intervention." He identifies and studies animals using photographic capture-recapture sampling, in which he places cameras throughout the tigers' range and occasionally captures and tracks them using collars.

"It started as a small project and took time," Karanth said. "You can't be Usain Bolt and do conservation. It's a marathon."

Throughout this marathon, conservationists must also utilize human networks to preserve a species. Karanth uses his relationships with a number of people within the government system, religious leaders and the media to promote [tiger](#) conservation. He also writes books and articles in the local languages to reach rural populations.

"We don't have a lot of time for experiments or romantic ideas, we need to make sure this species survives," Karanth said. "Solutions that are greatly rewarding [in other countries] just don't work in this context."

By reaching out to as wide of an audience as possible, Karanth said he was optimistic about the future for the tigers.

"I truly believe that we can at sometime have over 50,000 tigers in India again," he said.

Provided by Duke University

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