

International Tiger Forum Meeting in St. Petersburg

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Hosted by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the International Tiger Forum was unprecedented. For the first time, world leaders came together focused on saving a single species at the two-day meeting on 22nd November.

The main reasons for the drastic reduction of numbers of Tigers are four:

- Loss of habitat for Tigers
- Illegal poaching of Tigers
- Inadequate Wildlife laws
- Tigers Trade

In the last 100 years, tiger numbers have dropped from about 100,000 to less than 3,500 tigers in the wild today. There has been a 40% decline in numbers in a decade, and some populations are expected to disappear within the next 20 years.

According to a report of 2004, prepared by UNDP and Bangladesh Forest Department, the number of tigers in Sundarbans was 440 (male tiger 121, female tiger 298, and cubs 21) but experts say that cyclones such as Sidr and Aila have destroyed forests to an extent that the habitat for tigers has reduced by 30% per cent of the number quoted in 2004.

Tiger Range countries:

Heads of governments, ministers and experts from 13 Tiger range countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, Laos, Bhutan, Nepal Russia and Vietnam, having tigers' habitat attended the two-day conference that began on 22nd November, besides the President of the World Bank and animal lover- actors of Hollywood.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, has urged the world community to assist Bangladesh in protecting the Sundarban and the Royal Bengal Tigers. 'The international community can join in our efforts to save this natural green wonder, the Sundarban,' she said.

The Prime Minister was addressing the plenary session of International Forum on 'Preservation of Tigers' held at the Marble Hall of Konstantinovsky Palace in Saint Petersburg, Russia 23rd November.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina requested the international community to extend its support to the Sundarban by clicking in the web site. 'This click of yours could help the world's largest mangrove forest becoming one of the 'New Natural Seven Wonders', thereby preserving along with it, the Royal Bengal Tigers and millions of other species,' she said.

The Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, and the Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, among others, also addressed the session.

St. Petersburg Declaration:

The Global Tiger Recovery Program estimates the 13 nations countries including Bangladesh will need about \$350 million in outside funding in the first five years of the 12-year plan.

Many of the Tiger range countries are impoverished, and saving tigers may depend on sizable donations from the West. The nations sought donor commitments to help finance conservation measures, the agreement said.

The countries — including Russia, whose Far East is home to Siberian tigers, the largest tiger subspecies — have agreed to double the number of wild tigers to a target of 7,000 animals by 2022 and crack down on poaching and illicit trade in tiger pelts and body parts.

Group President Robert Zoellick, chief of the World Bank said in St. Petersburg , "This summit may be the last chance for the tiger; tigers are vanishing. There are fewer than 3,200 living in the wild today on only seven percent of the land they once roamed."

"We know what's causing the decline in number of wild tigers: It is illegal poaching, trafficking, lack of habitat," said Zoellick. The World Bank is supporting development of this tiger recovery effort from the bottom up with the 13 tiger range countries.

"Together with our partners in civil society and elsewhere, the World Bank Group aims to support the tiger range countries in achieving the goal they've set," Zoellick said

To help secure the future of Asia's critically endangered wild tigers, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) pledged to spend \$50 million over the next 10 years - \$5 million of the total during the next year. Dr. John Robinson, WCS chief conservation officer and executive vice president for conservation and science, made the commitment at the International Tiger Forum in St. Petersburg.

"Over the next 12 months, WCS will be putting close to \$5 million onto the ground in Asia for tiger conservation," said Robinson. "These are funds that are entrusted to us by bilateral government donors especially the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Agency for International Development, and multilaterals like the Global Environmental Facility and the World Bank.

The Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio braved scary skies to get to a summit devoted to saving the worlds' tigers, donating \$1 million to the cause and earning high praise from Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. DiCaprio has already helped the group raise \$20 million for tiger conservation earlier this year, it said

"The goal is difficult, but achievable," said Putin, who once shot a full grown female tiger with a tranquilizer gun and placing a tracking collar on her.

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.

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.

Robinson of the Wildlife Conservation Society said "No single country can address the challenges of tiger conservation by itself," he said. "No organization, no governmental institution can alone turn around the challenge posed by the decline in tiger numbers. Together, and in partnership, we can make a difference."

Conclusion:

To save tigers, the following actions need to be adopted: (a) Enforcement teams must be created in all countries to prosecute tiger trafficking rings, (b) Wildlife laws must be strengthened, (c) Poachers must be imposed heavy penalties and (d) Tiger trade must be stopped.

Experts say that \$350 million dollars are unlikely to save tigers and much more funds are necessary. There is a view that NGOs should also be involved to save tigers with adequate resources.