

15000 tigers in USA- 1000 in India

By Christine Heston

BELIEVE it or not, there are over 15,000 tigers in the USA, compared to 3,200 in the rest of the world! The Chinese new year named as the Year of the Tiger, in the Chinese national calendar of 12 yearly cycle starts on 14th February 2010. It is significant to note, that the last Chinese Year of the Tiger was in 1998, when the number of tigers in the world was about 5000 and since then the number of tigers in the world has fallen by 36 %!

For a long time, tigers (along with pandas) have been poster animals for the campaign to protect endangered creatures. But unlike pandas, who are dying out because of the erosion of their habitats, tigers have an additional problem on their paws - their numbers are fast depleting because of continued poaching. Activists for animal protection now draw the world's attention to the staggeringly low numbers of tigers surviving in Asia and the contrastingly high numbers in USA. (Only about 1000 tigers are

in India as per conservationist Maneka Gandhi).

While this could conjure up images of large Africa-style wilderness in USA for tigers to roam free, the estimated 15,000 tigers in USA do not enjoy such privileges. These exotic cats are part of roadside zoos, travelling exhibits and pseudo-sanctuaries that keep them captive under the guise of conservation. These dubious establishments, in reality, do great harm to the already stricken tiger numbers, as they practice unregulated breeding of tigers, which weakens the genetic strain of the species. Because of the suspect facilities used, the resulting tigers can never acclimatize to the wild, as they do not have the right genetic code required for survival. There are also the famous circuses, which train and rear tigers to be part of their routine until it all goes catastrophically wrong, like in the case of Roy Horn who was mauled by a tiger who rebelled against Horn's magic-with-animals routine.

Tigers are also the glamorous pets of the rich and famous, who can easily buy a tiger, the way they buy diamonds. Private owners flaunt their tigers and rear them in conditions that are extremely unhealthy, even by human

standards.

But American tigers are also prey to petrified humans. Every year quite a number of tigers die at the hands of humans. Recently, two tigers and a lion were shot by police after escaping from their enclosures, three tigers were put down after attacking people, and a lion-tiger hybrid was killed by an unknown rifleman. And then there is the usual assortment of crackpot dreamers and daredevils who want to own a tiger to emulate the heroes in the movies or want to create an exotic paradise for themselves. For example, the man who wanted to create a 'Garden of

Eden' in his fifth-floor New York apartment by populating it with two Bengal-Siberian tigers, a tiger cub and an alligator and a couple of dogs and tarantulas thrown in for variety. But when the owner was bitten ferociously by one of the tigers, the hospital alerted the authorities.

There are even those noble-minded tiger lovers who try their best, but lose out due to lack of funds and support. For example, John Weinhart, who ran a next-to-unknown tiger sanctuary was prosecuted for unlawful public display of tigers, breeding without a permit, failure to clean animal cages, supplying animals with insufficient food and water and, because his son is



said to have lived among the cats, child endangerment. Weinhart's reputation is that of crusader for abused tigers and saving them from shady circuses and other disreputable establishments, where they would have died an early death or sent for canned hunting.

Canned hunting is another reason, why tigers are reared in the USA - the legal hunting of these animals in purpose-built premises. Large parts of America (legally specified as 10 acres or more) are devoted to letting these animals roam free and live the life they would have been deprived of in the cages of zoos and circuses. Except, while they're enjoying the freedom, they periodically get shot and

killed! This is now a booming business in the USA, as it becomes the past-time of many a loaded businessman, celebrity and gun!

But what facilitates the keeping of tigers for entertainment and display in the USA are the widely flexible laws concerning keeping dangerous wild animals in captivity in the country. These laws change from state to state and county to county and vary from leniency to no law.

Ultimately, numbers alone mean nothing. The tigers in America may as well be extinct considering their state of health.

(With inputs from BBC)
-Maharaja Features

