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Save the tiger from those who love it

Tiger farming is probably the only solution that is going to work

Russia recently hosted a summit in St Petersburg to focus attention on the plight of the tiger in the wild. This is the first international summit of this kind, where heads of states of Russia, China, Bangladesh and some of the other range countries gathered to discuss the fate of the tiger. The summit follows the new Global Tiger Initiative launched by the World Bank earlier in the year. The bottle was new, but the content was the same old stale stuff!

It is believed that around 1,00,000 tigers roamed in the wild across 25 countries at the turn of the 1900. Today, barely 3,000 of them are in the wild. Another 10-15,000 are in captivity. The wild tiger, facing the prospect of extinction for the past 40 years, has seen a barrage of activism and funding. The Project Tiger was launched in the 1970s, then the World Bank's Global Environment Facility directed more funds towards forestry and conservation, since the early 1990s. Over the years, innumerable conferences have been held and cash promised but nothing has helped the tiger yet. The summiters in St Petersburg kept with that tradition, promising \$350 million over the next few years, though more staunch environmentalists complained that barely 10% of this money is really new.

The delegates once again promised to work together to improve law enforcement so that the most profitable aspect, the smuggling of tigers parts, can be

eliminated. They reaffirmed the belief that poaching of tigers poses the single biggest threat to wild tiger population, largely from India, which has half the wild tigers of the world today, to China, which has almost none, but where there is a demand for tiger body parts.

The biggest threat to the tiger comes from loss of habitat and man-animal conflict. Each year, a couple of hundred people die from wildlife attacks, mostly tigers, leopards and elephants. This often leads to revenge killings. On the other hand, poaching is estimated to constitute just about 25% of the threat to the tiger.

The most practical solution to saving tigers is allowing human beings some sense of property over them. Almost every species that brings any economic benefit to humans is generally nurtured and preserved: the humble cow is not facing extinction, despite the massive economic exploitation.

The tiger can also be as valuable. In the wild, it can attract tourists, nature lovers and even hunters, and generate revenue that can compensate for its keep. But this will only happen if the people living in its vicinity have some form of property right and ownership over the animal and its habitat, and can legitimately claim a share of profits.

A dead tiger is equally valuable for its skins and bones. And since the tiger breeds easily, even in captivity, it could be possible to breed them to meet the demand, again generating economic benefits. Alligator farming generates \$20 million annually in the American state of Louisiana alone.

Demand for tiger parts in China could provide a big economic advantage and secure the future of the tiger in the wild. India is currently allocating about \$20,000 per tiger per year and the money is not helping the tiger. Instead, a tiger could potentially earn 4 to 5 times as much and save itself from extinction.

The farmed or ranched animals could take the pressure off their wild cousins. And the wild ones could then become valuable as well for tourists and environmentalists. Activists, and their political allies, don't pursue these solutions; they are more interested in blaming humans as the problem. So they recommend clearing humans from tiger habitat areas.

Focusing on the problem creates an illusion for green summiters that they are seriously engaged. It's this illusive perception that helps political leaders consolidate their power in the name of protecting tiger. After all, in contrast to

an ever-demanding populace in a democracy, tigers make no demands. A blank check, that is a dream of all political leaders. But times are changing. Even the poorest forest dwellers in India are becoming aware of their citizenship in a democracy. They are demanding a way out of grinding poverty. They are voting for their rights. They are many times more numerous than the tiger wallahs!

At St Petersburg, delegates recognised that 40 years of conservation efforts to protect the tiger have failed, yet went on to promise more of the same. Pitting people, who live in close proximity to wild animals, against the animals. In such a conflict, the animals stand not a chance. It is time to realise that forests and wildlife are renewable resources. If the people are able to profit from those resources, then they will go out of their way to nurture and grow those resources. It is time to harness the power of commerce for the cause of conservation of tigers and its habitat. There is no need to wait for the delegates in St Petersburg to show the way.

Just as the world economy is trying to claw its way out of trouble on the basis of growing demand in developing countries, so too the tiger in the wild could be saved precisely because there is a demand for it, both dead and alive. Let the tiger earn its stripes!



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