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Reintroduction of the Chinese Tiger

Urs Breitenmoser¹, Ron Tilson² and Philip Nyhus³

On 17–18 December 2005, the Department of Wildlife Conservation of the State Forestry Administration (SFA) of the P. R. China, supported by the non-governmental organisation Save China's Tigers, organised a workshop on the rehabilitation and reintroduction of the South China Tiger (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*). The South China tiger is listed as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List. There may be some tigers left in the wild, but there is a good possibility the in situ population is extinct. The tiger is not only an ecological umbrella species, but has an outstanding cultural significance, and the Chinese are dedicated to saving it.

Save China's Tigers, with support of SFA, has developed a plan to reintroduce captive-born South China tigers into large enclosures in southern China. Two years ago, four young tigers from Chinese zoos were brought into a large enclosure in South Africa for rehabilitation and to learn to catch wild prey. This translocation was widely criticised in the conservation community, and the Cat Specialist Group, together with other IUCN institutions, has expressed its concern about this approach (see article in Cat News 39, autumn 2003), but also offered the Chinese authorities its help for the development of a consistent conservation strategy.

SFA and Save China's Tigers invited national and international experts and representatives of the Chinese provinces involved to the workshop in Beijing to review the situation of the Chinese tiger in the wild and in captivity and to discuss possibilities to conserve it. Wang Wei, Director of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, stressed that the survival of the South China tiger is a high priority of the Chinese government. Li Quan, director of Save China's Tigers, expressed the dedication of her organisation to continue supporting the efforts of the Chinese authorities to recover the tigers, their habitats and

prey, and emphasised the opportunity to combine this with economic incentives for the local people through eco-tourism. National and international experts – many of them members of the Cat Specialist Group – presented papers on the situation of the Chinese tigers in the wild and in captivity as well as on the conservation efforts in the northern provinces, where China shares the Amur tiger population with Russia, and on educational and community-involvement projects elsewhere. Representatives of the southern provinces Hunan and Jiangxi introduced the reintroduction project and the designated sites.

The main concerns of the experts regarding the reintroduction are the availability of suitable habitat and adequate prey, and the fitness of the captive population. In 2005, the captive population included 78 individuals, all derived from only six founders caught in the wild before 1970. It was broadly acknowledged that inbreeding was a problem; even so, the captive population appears not to be “pure” South China tigers. Deliberate hybridisation to address the problem of inbreeding was discussed, but no conclusion was reached.

The crucial question, however, is whether enough living space with suitable habitat and sufficient wild prey is left in the traditional range of the South China tiger to support a viable population, or whether the space needed could be re-established. Consequently, the final discussion focussed on the minimum goal for a free-ranging South China tiger population. Even though none of the participants dared to define what a “viable” tiger population is, it was generally acknowledged that landscape-level conservation of wilderness habitat and recovery of wild herbivore populations as prey base for the tiger will be required. A suggested eventual goal was to establish at least three populations, with each population consisting of a minimum of about 15–20 tigers living in a minimum of 1,000 km² of natural habitat. This suggestion was



Habitat in Zixi county in Jiangxi Province. Many rice fields are left derelict as a consequence of the rural exodus that many mountain areas of China presently experience.

based in part on the preliminary results of recent field work carried out in the summer of 2005 and presented at the meeting.

The Cat Specialist Group welcomes all efforts to save China's tigers as long as they are done in accordance with general IUCN policy and standards. To create large enclosures in the South China tiger's historic range and to stock them with captive bred animals can be a first step towards reintroduction, but the ultimate goal must be the recovery of a self-sustaining free-ranging population. To re-integrate wild tigers into the human dominated landscapes of southern China is a great challenge that needs sound expertise, long-term commitment, and adequate funding. China is experiencing tremendous economic development, with fast growing cities and an unseen rural exodus, leaving many villages in the mountains abandoned. The transition from a rural to an urban society changes the peoples' attitude to nature and opens new perspectives for the recovery of natural habitats and wildlife – why not for the majestic South China tiger, which could, as a flagship species, help to conserve many other species.

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