Keeping Problem Tigers from Becoming a Problem Species

In their recent point-counterpoint regarding priorities for tiger conservation, Saberwal (1997) and Karanth and Madhusudan (1997) initiate an important dialogue on the direction tiger conservation in Asia needs to move. We write to highlight what we believe is a critical—but frequently underemphasized—component of the tiger conservation puzzle: how to respond to problem tigers, those tigers that kill or injure humans or livestock.

To protect tigers, Norchi and Bolze (1995) call for the identification of high-priority populations, better legislation, reduction of habitat loss and prey base decline, control of trade in tiger parts, and "support for tigers among people living near them ...." These issues, also discussed by Nowell and Jackson (1996) and Dinerstein et al. (1997), and presented at the recent Tigers 2000 symposium (Seidensticker 1997), reflect a growing consensus among tiger conservationists that there are two fundamental hurdles to saving tigers in the wild: halting the loss and degradation of tiger habitat and prey and controlling poaching and trade in tiger parts.

We agree. But we are concerned that even if more habitat is secured and trade in tiger parts is reduced, the specter of increasing tiger-human conflicts may overshadow these efforts. Human and livestock losses from tiger attacks are, as pointed out by Saberwal (1997), "…one of the most basic causes of local animosity toward tiger conservation." In Sumatra, Indonesia, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, tigers still roam outside the boundaries of designated core protected areas (Dinerstein et al. 1997). Although these protected areas will form the base of future tiger conservation units, and indeed may provide the only safe long-term refuge from poaching, habitat degradation, and prey loss, it is in nonprotected and low-priority conservation areas where people and tigers will most overlap. If conflict resolution between tigers and people in these areas is not addressed, we worry that hostility toward tigers will only continue to grow.

Recently we witnessed such a tiger "crisis" in Sumatra. In 3 months, four villagers were killed and five villagers and several livestock were attacked by tigers in one multiple-use protected forest. In 1996 and 1997 more than a dozen deaths were allegedly caused by tigers in Sumatra, far above the average of two per year cited by Indonesian authorities. From these experiences and our field work in Indonesia, we would like to propose two points for consideration in the ongoing tiger conservation debate.

First, there is an urgent need to develop a systematic process for dealing with problem tigers. Many authors describe tiger-human conflicts (reviewed in Nowell & Jackson 1996), particularly in the context of tigers as "man-eaters," but to our knowledge no proactive policies regarding problem tigers have been implemented in tiger range states. We believe this issue can be addressed in part by organizing, training, and equipping teams capable of responding to a spectrum of tiger conflicts. This issue is recognized in the Indonesian *Sumatran Tiger Conservation Strategy* (Ministry of Forestry 1994), which recommends rescue teams be formed to deal with problem tigers. These teams have yet to be deployed.

Second, we believe that if tiger-human conflicts increase in transition areas where both tigers and humans share resources but neither has "priority," the support of local people will erode and so too may the enthusiasm of political leaders and conservation authorities to protect tigers. We run the risk that these tigers will be perceived not as individual animals causing local problems, a controllable dilemma, but as a dangerous "problem species"—a label that will certainly make support for landscape-level tiger conservation initiatives even more difficult. We need to remove the onus of the tiger as a "man-eater," relabel the tiger as "predator," and manage the species accordingly.

Our concern is that if the international tiger conservation community and range state conservation authorities do not adequately deal with tiger-human conflicts, we run the risk of losing political support for tigers and protected areas and an increasing number of dead tigers as a result of local animosity. Poaching and trade for profit by outsiders could easily be surpassed by quiet acts of poisoning for retribution by angry villagers. Plowden and Bowles (1997) already note that farmers may be the main killers of tigers in Sumatra. Given these circumstances, we advocate that tiger range states develop and implement proactive policies to manage problem tigers as part of their larger strategic plan to save tigers.

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