



Elusive when it needs to be, always unpredictable and majestic, the tiger combines power and beauty in a way that few other creatures can rival. No other animal except perhaps the elephant has managed to capture the imagination of the human mind as powerfully as the tiger has.

Although about two or three million years ago, in central or eastern Asia, tigers were dispersed north into Russia, south and eastward into the Indonesian chain of islands (eventually reaching as far as Bali), south and westward throughout India, and west as far as the Caspian Sea, but by the early 1970's the tiger was gasping for life.

There are eight subspecies of tiger, each has adapted to different habitats and climates. Some are found in the coniferous forest and winter snows of Siberia, the oak forest of northeast China, grasslands and monsoon, bamboo and mangrove forests in India and Bangla-

desh and the tropical rainforests of Malaysia, Thailand, Indochina and other parts of Southeast Asia. Today, due to its endangerment, the territory has been significantly limited.

Tigers are solitary and independent creatures, they do not form large groups like lions. However, the territories of a male may overlap those of several female and especially when the mother is raising the cubs, they will form a small family unit. Tigers need a good supply of prey (especially deer and wild boar) and plenty of water throughout the year and forest cover for hunting and breeding. Apart from large preys, tigers also eat rodents, birds, porcupines, frogs and fish.

Despite its wide range and adaptability to varying habitats and climates, the tigers are severely threatened today. It is so dependent on forest cover that it cannot survive where people have cleared the lands. Deforestation also contributes to the scarcity of its natural



Can we Save the Tiger

prey. When prey is scarce, a tiger may start to roam around villages and take livestock. Other than habitat loss, the other critical threat to tigers is the illegal trade in tiger parts.

In Chinese popular medicine, nearly every part of the tiger's body is valued and this has been an added incentive to poachers. The consumption of tiger parts for medicinal purposes is not restricted to Asia. Only a few years ago, a study in the UK of Chinese chemists, craft shops and supermarkets in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool showed that half the shops sold products professing to contain tiger bone.

Tigers are on the brink of extinction. There are only between 5,000 and 7,400 tigers left in the wild and the number keeps shrinking. Of the 8 species of tigers, only 5 are still in existence today. Currently, the estimated population for the remaining subspecies left in the wild are the South China Tiger with approximately 50, the Siberian (Amur) Tiger with about 150 to 200, the Indo-China Tiger with an estimate of about 900 to 1200, the Sumatran Tiger with approximately 400 to 500, and the Bengal Tiger estimated between 2700 and 4300 remaining in the wild.

The tiger symbolizes the very essence of life and has been the indicator of the health of a natural system. The fate of the remaining tigers in our world, and their habitats, rests directly with the people who live with them. If they are ignored as they have been in centuries, there is little hope for the survival of the tiger habitat. People must feel secure enough to participate in the protection of forests - they must be confident that it will benefit them as well as wildlife.

This is a crucial moment in the history of the tiger. If it does survive, it will be because the lost tribes and forest communities have found a way to rise up against the holocaust they are facing in these last years of the new millennium. As Valmik Thapar, whose interview you will read in the following pages says, "The tiger's future is inextricably entangled with that of the people who inhabit its land. The tiger's destiny is their destiny." And ours too - for we share the world and the tiger's fate with it. Every extinction hurts us - and when there are too many extinctions, we too will die like the tiger. Saving the tiger is a matter of passion, an analogy, to saving us.