

CAT

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news



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Stop the bleeding: implementing a strategic Tiger Conservation Protocol

Tigers remain our most critically endangered large cat species. The international community appears unable to stem the decline of tiger numbers, despite significant amounts of attention and funding, and a plethora of NGO's claiming to be saving the world's largest felid. The crux of the problem is that best practices for tiger conservation are not being accepted or adhered to. While we have the knowledge and the means to save core tiger populations and important tiger landscapes, the tiger conservation community does not work in synergy with each other. **New initiatives for saving tigers are continually coming forth with agendas that are self-promoting, distracting, or lack potential for advancing and improving the situation for tigers.**

At the heart of this issue is the fact that protecting core populations of tigers and their prey species is the most immediate need. Whatever other ideas and strategies are considered, we will lose tigers if we do not immediately and vigorously stem the killing of tigers and their prey in the wild. Everything

else is secondary right now. In this document, Panthera, in consultation with its partners and advisors summarizes best practices for protecting and conserving tigers within core populations and throughout the contiguous landscapes in which these populations exist. This is not meant to be a "cookbook" for tiger conservation. The tools used at any particular site are dependent upon size and landscape features of the site, tiger densities, funding, available personnel, and government cooperation. While some of the activities listed in the Tiger Conservation Protocol (TCP) below are already being carried out by international NGO's and government agencies, it is the proper use and rigor of the methodology, and the entirety of the protocol, that make it an effective tool to increase tiger numbers. At this moment, very few sites in tiger range countries are implementing the Tiger Conservation Protocol.

Panthera's tiger strategy is based on implementing the TCP at important tiger sites embedded within important tiger landscapes. At

present, Panthera, in partnership with WCS, is accomplishing this through their *Tigers Forever* program. As we move forward, it is our intention to focus on sites where we can have the greatest impact and where there exists the best chance of connectivity throughout the tiger landscape. Panthera hopes to expand to other sites and engage with other partners as long as the TCP is adhered to and the core focus is not diluted. Protocol steps I-VII are the most crucial immediate steps needed to stop tiger decline at any site. These steps should be the core components of ANY comprehensive tiger conservation strategy. Steps VIII-X of the protocol should be undertaken only when I-VI have already been initiated and are showing indications of helping to stabilize or increase tiger and tiger prey populations.

Despite great damage inflicted upon tiger populations, tigers can be saved in the wild. This is the premise to which we are committed. The effectiveness of our efforts for the species across its range, however, will depend upon scale, long-term site based presence, on-going financial commitments, and, most importantly, a commitment to proper methodology as put forth in the TCP.

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Wild tiger, Kaziranga National Park, India (Photo S. Winter, Panthera)

Tiger Conservation Protocol (TCP)

- I. Determine the exact site that can realistically be protected given the existing legal framework, government will, finances, and manpower. Ideally the site should be embedded within a larger potential tiger landscape.
 - II. Conduct a threats analysis to assess immediate critical threats to the tiger population
Most common critical threats include:
 - Direct killing of tigers
 - On-going killing of tiger prey species (particularly over 50 kg)
 - Loss or degradation of tiger habitat
 - III. Assess the current status of the tiger population
Most common indicators of status include:
 - a. Density estimates
 - b. Minimum numbers
 - c. Relative abundance indices
 Most common tools used to currently assess status include:
 - d. Camera traps
 - e. Track counts
 - f. Fecal genetics
 - g. Large-scale occupancy surveys
 - IV. Mitigate or eliminate most critical immediate threats to the tiger populations at a site
Most common activities include:
 - a. Increased numbers of guards or guard posts
 - b. Increased patrolling efforts
 - c. Stricter enforcement of laws
 - d. Weapon confiscation
 - e. Informant networks, particularly for tiger hunters
 - f. Incentivized resettlement for people inside core tiger areas
 - g. Shutting down of local trade for tiger parts and prey species
 - V. Monitor success of threat mitigation and adjust activities accordingly
Indirect measures of success include:
 - a. Numbers of arrests
 - b. Numbers of arms and snare confiscations
 - c. Encounters with poachers and/or poacher camps
 - d. Cases taken to court and/or successful prosecutions
 - VI. Monitor changes to the tiger population
 - a. Assess changes of tiger numbers
 - b. Assess changes of breeding females and young
 Most common tools same as in III.
 - VII. Monitor tiger prey populations, particular prey >50 kg
Most common tools used:
 - a. Prey transects
 - b. Small scale occupancy
 - c. Relative abundance indices
 - VIII. Address long-term, less immediate threats to tiger population
Some long-term threat considerations include:
 - a. Increased protection status for land used by tigers
 - b. Increase in protected area numbers and size
 - c. Education programs about tiger conservation
 - d. International trade issues
 - e. Community development linkages to core tiger sites
 - f. Link tiger protection to other resource management activities
 - IX. Identify important landscape attributes around core tiger population
 - X. Investigate potential dispersal corridors or linkages that allow for increased effective population size or metapopulations
Potential tools include:
 - a. Satellite or GPS telemetry
 - b. Camera traps
 - c. Fecal genetics
- In order to successfully accomplish the TCP, optimal circumstances include:
1. Commitment to long-term site involvement
 2. Adequate numbers of trained staff and associated labor
 3. Contacts and recognition of the tiger conservation program at the national level
 4. Recognition/agreements at local/community level
 5. Long-term committed funding stream
 6. Continuous evaluation of practices and their effectiveness