

# U.S. Conservation Efforts for Tigers

## What is the status of tigers in the wild and what are the major conservation threats to them?

The tiger (*Panthera tigris*) is the largest and perhaps the best known of the wild cats. It is also the most imperiled. There are generally recognized to be eight subspecies of tiger, of which three are now considered extinct. Although the tiger once ranged across Asia from eastern Turkey to the Russian Far East, it currently survives only in scattered populations from India to Viet Nam, and in Indonesia, China, and the Russian Far East. The principal threats to wild tiger populations are illegal hunting and trade, loss of habitat, and a declining tiger prey base. Additionally, the growing popularity and use of tiger parts and products in traditional medicine poses a significant threat to wild tiger populations. By current estimates, there are only 5,000 to 7,000 tigers remaining in the wild.

## What U.S. laws and international agreements protect tigers?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is the principal Federal agency responsible for implementing and enforcing the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Both the ESA and CITES afford protection to endangered species and wildlife of global concern. The ESA specifically prohibits the interstate and foreign commerce in listed species, such as the tiger, and their parts and products. The Service's approximately 220 Special Agents and 120 Wildlife Inspectors within its Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) help control illegal trade and international movement of tigers and their part and products.

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act (RTCA) to assist in the conservation of rhinoceroses and tigers by establishing the Rhinoceros and

Tiger Conservation Fund. Through this Fund, the Service supports anti-poaching programs, habitat and ecosystem management, development of nature reserves, wildlife surveys and monitoring, management of human-wildlife conflict, public awareness campaigns, and other conservation-related efforts for rhinoceroses and tigers. The RTCA was amended in 1998 to prohibit the sale, importation, and exportation of products intended for human use, or labeled or advertised as containing,

any substance derived from any species of rhinoceros or tiger.

The RTCA labeling provision authorizes OLE to seize tiger and rhinoceros products directly from vendors, distributors, shippers, or importers, and provides substantial criminal and civil penalties for violators. In the last six years, OLE has pursued over 100 RTCA violations alone, resulting in the removal of thousands of illegal tiger and rhinoceros products from trade and



substantial fines and penalties levied against the offenders. In conjunction with CITES and the ESA, the RTCA is a powerful new tool in combating the global trade in products containing tiger and rhinoceros parts.

### **How are captive tigers in the U.S. regulated?**

The 2003 Captive Wildlife Safety Act (CWSA), and associated regulations soon to be published, will give the Service a new enforcement tool that will assist in keeping large cats, including tigers, in responsible hands. Except for persons or institutions licensed or registered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) under the Animal Welfare Act, the CWSA makes it illegal to import, export, transport, sell, receive, acquire, or purchase, in interstate or foreign commerce, live large cats (lion, tiger, leopard, snow leopard, cheetah, jaguar, and cougar, including all subspecies and hybrids of these species). In addition, a number of states and local jurisdictions have regulations controlling the possession and sale of big cats.

### **What U.S. enforcement efforts are being taken to control the trade in tigers?**

The Service's violation records and intelligence reports show that most international trade in tiger skins and parts does not involve U.S. tigers. Over the past five years, OLE has not discovered or received any credible information suggesting that U.S. held tigers or their parts have been unlawfully exported. During that same period, OLE investigated over 100 cases leading to nearly 300 violations involving unlawful importation, exportation, or interstate trafficking in tiger parts or products.

In 2003, OLE concluded one of its largest cases ever, on the illegal killing and trafficking of tiger and other exotic cat skins and parts from animals held in captivity in the United States. The six year investigation uncovered a loosely organized group of individuals in the U.S. Midwest that bought and killed large cats such as tigers, leopards, snow leopards, and lions. Sixteen individuals from six States were charged with violating federal wildlife laws, and the defendants received a total of 80

months in federal prison, \$75,000 in fines, and \$226,000 in restitution paid to the Save the Tiger Fund. During the course of this investigation, no evidence was found to suggest that any of the defendants was supplying foreign demand for tiger skins and parts. The substantial sentences handed down in this case, as well as others, create a strong deterrent to would-be violators and highlight the continuing U.S. commitment to protecting endangered species, including tigers.

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Fall 2006

