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International Tiger Coalition

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Study: Viable Tiger Populations, Tiger Trade Incompatible

The Hague – In the cover story of this month’s BioScience journal, leading tiger experts warn that if tigers are to survive, governments must stop all trade in tiger products from wild and captive-bred sources, as well as ramp up efforts to conserve the species and their habitats. The paper, “The Fate of Wild Tigers,” describes the wild tiger’s population decline as “catastrophic” and urges international cooperation to ensure the animal’s continued existence in the wild.

Habitat loss and intense poaching of tigers and their prey, combined with inadequate government efforts to maintain tiger populations, have resulted in a dramatic reduction in tiger numbers. These big cats now occupy just 7 percent of their historical range, according to the BioScience paper. And the possibility that China could reopen trade in parts harvested from farmed tigers represents a new threat, the authors say.

“A legal market in China for products made from farmed tigers will increase demand and allow criminals to ‘launder’ products made from tigers poached from the wild,” said lead author Eric Dinerstein, chief scientist at WWF-US. “We’re recommending that tiger range states and other governments with an interest in tiger conservation convene a high-level ‘tiger summit’ to address poaching, trade and habitat protection – urgently.”

The peer-reviewed journal article was published as delegates from 171 nations gather here to discuss wildlife trade issues. It comes on the heels of India’s announcement that tiger numbers in central India are 60 percent lower than previously thought, news that illustrates the BioScience paper’s assessment of “range collapse” across some of the tiger’s remaining habitat.

To add to the tiger’s woes, investors in massive tiger breeding centers in China are putting pressure on the Chinese government to lift its successful 14-year-old ban on trade in tiger bones so they can legally sell products like tiger bone wine.

“Countries with tigers must let China know that its 1993 ban on tiger trade has been a success in helping slow poaching of wild tigers and that the ban needs to remain in place,” said Josh Ginsberg of the Wildlife Conservation Society and a co-author of the paper.

The paper does offer hope for tigers. Where governments and conservationists make consistent and substantial commitments to tiger conservation, tigers do recover, the authors found. The 15 co-authors include scientists from Wildlife Conservation Society, the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, the Smithsonian Conservation and Research Center, WWF, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation-Save The Tiger Fund and Simons and Associates. BioScience is the journal of the American Institute of Biological Sciences.

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