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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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CAT Walks in Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor

Public empowerment and engagement in wildlife conservation

Malaysia one of the most mega-diverse countries, is showing sign of the empty-forest syndrome; its 130 million year old forests are being emptied out by systematic poaching of commercially valuable species. Besides strengthening law enforcement, it is critical to engage members of the public to bring about the change needed in our society. Using the Malayan tiger as the flagship species, MYCAT expands its citizen conservation programme towards ending the societally endorsed passivity towards wildlife conservation and strives to save large expanses of living forests rich in biodiversity.

Once numbering more than 3,000, there are believed to be less than 500 wild tigers surviving in Malaysia (DWNP 2008). The proximate causes for the decline are the same as for other endangered apex predators elsewhere, specifically, poaching of tigers and prey, habitat loss and fragmentation, and persecution due to conflicts with human interest. Even where laws are in place, current levels of enforcement simply cannot arrest the onslaught on biodiversity around us. But in Malaysia, which boasts a GDP per capita of USD 7,030 (World Bank 2009), 98% youth literacy rate (UNESCO 2008), and 60% forest cover (Government of Malaysia 2009), the ultimate cause behind the loss of biodiversity, particularly the sharp decline in tiger numbers in the past 50 years, may well be the huge backdrop of seemingly unconcerned members of the public.

It is too easy to blame the government for inadequate law enforcement. The truth is that law enforcement alone cannot bring about the desired result unless society at large also “walks the talk” and reprimands its own misdemeanours and errant behaviours. Against this enormous backdrop, the number of personnel in wildlife enforcement agencies and its effectiveness will always be diminutive until the attitudes and willingness to act in society change. At a national level, without working towards creating such societal change, the efforts by the enforcement agencies and conservation NGOs will almost be futile.

The tiger is also one of many charismatic species facing extinction partly because conservation professionals are failing to harness the public’s concern, compassion and ethics

towards other life forms to which humans are connected. In recent years, there have been indications that concerned individuals from the public do want to help. But, helping is not as easy as it seems, given the quagmire of legality issues about access to protected areas, the risks related to law enforcement work, the high level of commitment required and the need for capacity building. If there are indeed socially responsible Malaysian part-time conservationists interested in helping to protect Malaysia’s wildlife, where do they go or what can they do? How can they get involved and play their part? These individuals have to be given a means to contribute in a meaningful way that does not require them to make unreasonable sacrifices or take over the duties of government agencies. We realised that with the right kind of volunteer programmes, coupled with the necessary support, they might form the nucleus for others wanting to join in the trend, i.e., to become and take part as morally and socially responsible members of the society.

At the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (MYCAT), our ability to influence the public is magnified because four of the leading nature conservation NGOs in Peninsular Malaysia, namely Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Programme (WCS) and WWF-Malaysia, work in unison towards the goal of the National Tiger Conservation Action Plan (DWNP 2008) through cooperation and by consolidating and sharing resources, be it expertise, information, manpower or funds.

Albeit modest, we started engaging the public through our community outreach pro-



Fig. 1. Promotional items for the Wildlife Crime Hotline, in the form of a cartoon, bumper sticker, and newspaper insert. Source for the cartoon: Majestic Stripes – The Malayan Tiger, Maybank, 2010.

gramme, “Tiger Roadshow”, back in 2005 by: 1) reaching out to communities close to wildlife crime locations (poaching, trade and consumption) with conservation messages and tools to change their mindsets and behaviours; 2) teaching school children through games and art about the connections of the web of life and the cruelty of wildlife crimes; and 3) empowering concerned members of the public to conduct the Tiger Roadshow. Not the most efficient, but the best way to



Fig. 2. The number of reliable reports sent to the wildlife authorities and the status of actions taken between 2008 and 2011 (MYCAT 2012). The Wildlife Crime Hotline is jointly funded by MNS, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, WCS-Malaysia Programme and WWF-Malaysia, and managed by the MYCAT Secretariat’s Office. Blue = action taken, red = unknown.

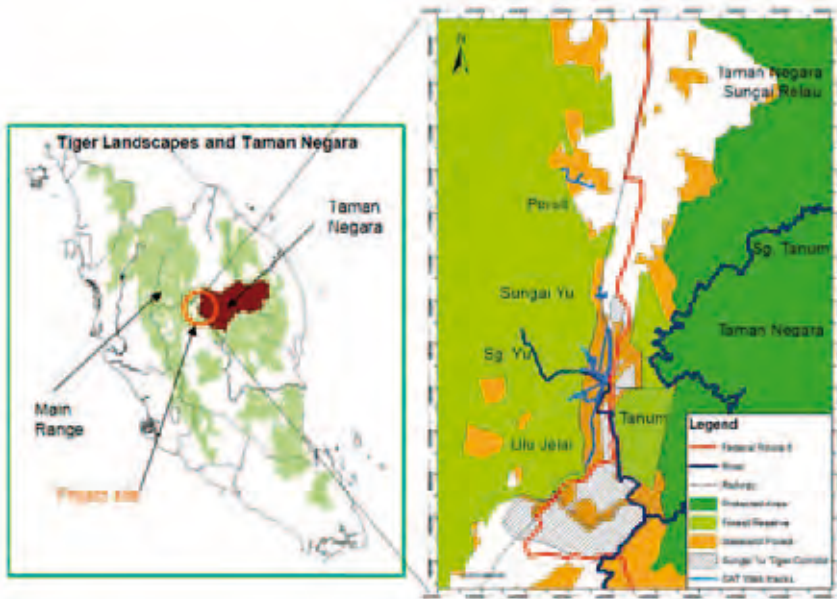


Fig. 3. The location of the Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor, which is one of the four priority corridors identified in the national tiger conservation strategy (DWNP 2008) and various routes taken by CAT Walkers.

influence people is by personal contact – one by one. Our celebrated volunteers, some 525 of them, have done just that by approaching shoppers at night markets and even visiting locals house-to-house and shop-to-shop at crime hotspots. Through them as multipliers, we have reached, educated, and influenced a total of 32,830 Malaysians since 2005. The Wildlife Crime Hotline is another avenue for public involvement. It was established in late 2007 with the purpose of encouraging the public to report wildlife crimes to the MY-

CAT Secretariat’s Office, which then relays the pertinent information to, and liaises with, law enforcement agencies, and follows up on the actions taken (Fig. 1). There has been a five-fold increase of reliable information received and relayed since 2008 (Fig. 2). However, very often when information reaches the Secretariat’s Office, it is too late for wildlife – the animals are already dead or removed from their habitats. There was therefore a need to be much more proactive in engaging the public and as such, MYCAT de-

vised a new strategy in 2010 and conducted a 6-month pilot project with assistance from MNS Selangor Branch Nature Guides at the Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor in Pahang. This is the Citizen Action for Tigers (CAT) programme. Due to legal and technical issues, WCS is not yet part of CAT, although it acknowledges the important contributions made by volunteers in protecting wildlife.

A narrow stretch of forest surrounding Sungai Yu (Yu River), located 15 km south of the Taman Negara National Park entrance at Sungai Relau (also known as Merapoh) in Pahang, is the only link connecting the two largest tiger landscapes in Peninsular Malaysia – the Main Range and Greater Taman Negara (Fig. 3). Yu River drains into the Pahang River, the longest river in Peninsular Malaysia.

The stateland forest around Sungai Yu is an open access forest for anyone to enter without permit. This area provides everyone, from local villagers and aboriginal people to foreign agarwood collectors, an easy access to interior forest reserves and Taman Negara, which then become vulnerable to poaching pressure. This poaching issue is exacerbated during the weekends and public holidays when government enforcement staff is often not on duty. A three-year joint research project (2009-2011) between MYCAT and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (DWNP) to determine wildlife use of the corridor (Kawanishi et al. 2011) has identified poaching hotspots and illegal access routes to Taman Negara and adjacent forest reserves.

In some cases, especially where there are no active patrols, wildlife could be safer near recreational areas that have minimal human impact because the presence of the public deters poaching activities. Likewise, the CAT programme deters poaching by the strategic placement of volunteer naturalists and bird watchers at the hotspots during weekends and public holidays when enforcement staff is seldom on duty. They enter only stateland forests that require no entry permits. Information on suspicious activities are sent to the hotline and subsequently relayed to the relevant enforcement agencies for action (Fig. 4). Volunteers are not conducting patrols but their presence and information support the authorities’ own patrols and enforcement actions.

During the pilot phase between September 2010 and March 2011, 27 volunteers in seven teams walked a total of 60 km, hiking large logging roads and exploring side trails

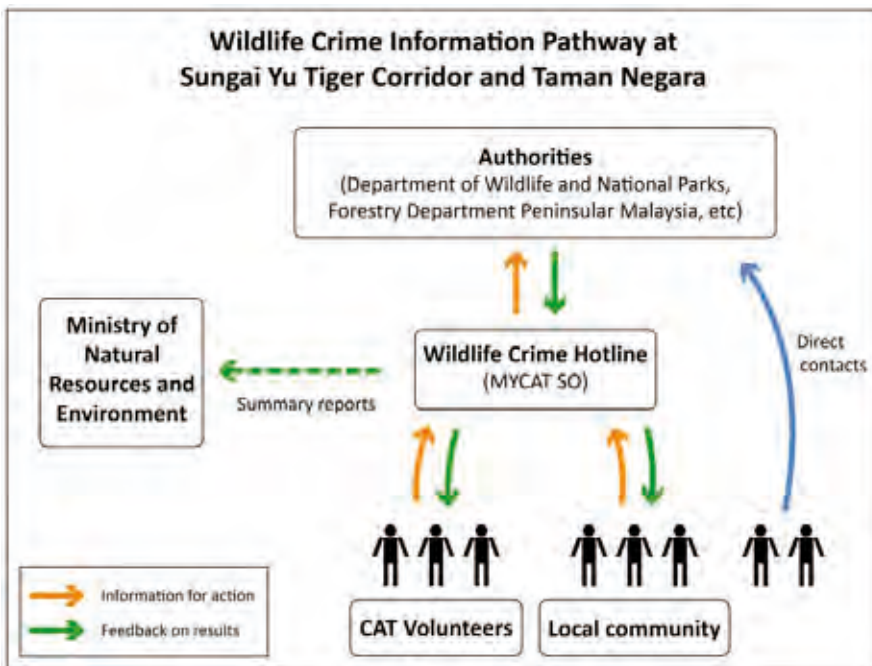


Fig. 4. Diagram depicting the pathway of information on wildlife crime at Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor and Taman Negara from the local community and CAT volunteers to the authorities.

while watching birds, studying animal tracks and swimming in Sungai Yu. Some actively looked for snares as they went along. During one trip, a snare was destroyed and following the report on its location, DWNP's patrol team went farther into the area and found 51 more snares and a number of snared animal carcasses. And a definite success of the CAT programme came about when information reported by volunteers led to the arrest of a restaurant owner at the corridor for possession of tiger and tiger prey parts. Under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010, he faces mandatory jail and a cumulative fine of up to MYR 600,000 (USD 200,000).

Besides the successful CAT Walks at leisure for weekend naturalists, in 2011 together with DWNP we introduced a more physically demanding CAT Trailblazer programme whereby volunteer backpackers trek park borders with park rangers for five days to carry out maintenance of the border while deterring poaching and keeping watchful eyes out for illegal activities and tiger signs (Fig. 5).

Together with the hotline and Tiger Roadshow, CAT empowers and engages the Malaysian public to help reduce the killing, trade and consumption of tigers and prey, all in support of DWNP's enforcement actions. Besides the obvious benefit to threatened wildlife, these are avenues by which members of the public realise their part in the change needed in our society. Furthermore, CAT promotes ecotourism in Taman Negara and the Sungai Yu area, leading to financial benefits to the local community.

We envision that CAT will facilitate not only tigers safely dispersing across the Sungai Yu Tiger Corridor but also the Taman Negara sambar deer population re-colonising the adjacent forest reserves in the Main Range where they are depleted due to poaching (Kawanishi et al. 2011, Kawanishi et al. in press). Through CAT and Tiger Roadshow, we will continue to inculcate, develop and nurture members of the Malaysian public towards creating a more caring and ethical society towards wildlife. If these individuals can continuously express their passion and increase the base of people wanting to give wildlife a chance of surviving alongside our kind, our chances of succeeding multiplies. And if we succeed, we get to keep the planet complete with tigers and us.

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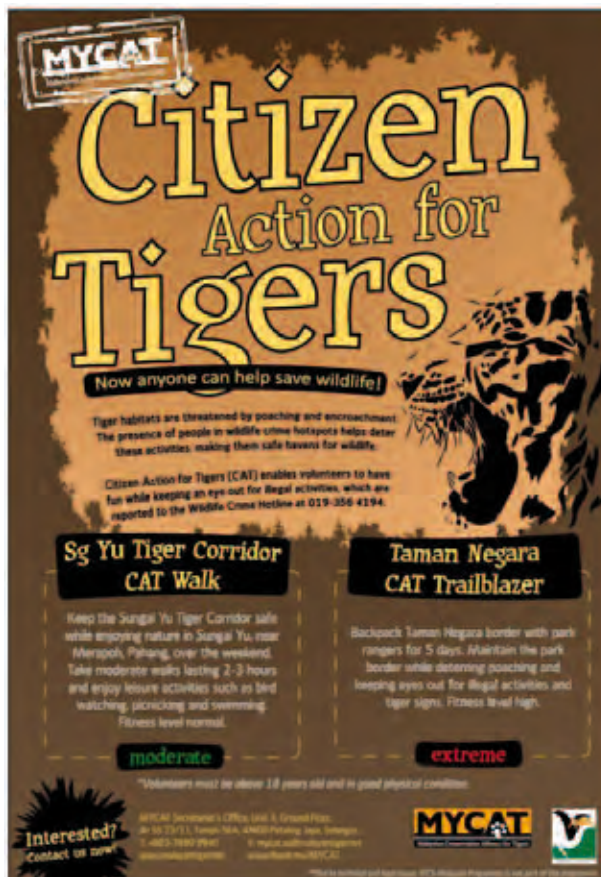


Fig. 5. Two types of the CAT programme.

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