

# Tigers need privatisation too

Brendan Moyle

Suppose you took an iconic endangered species and put in a plan to save it. But after five years, there is no sign of reversing the species' dramatic decline. Surely you would recognise that the plan is not working and look for alternatives?

There has been a catastrophic reduction in numbers of tigers in the wild, particularly in India. Only in China are numbers increasing—where they are being commercially farmed.

But at the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in The Hague in June, misguided conservationists struck another blow against sustainability. The Convention decided to restrict the captive breeding programmes in China without coming up with a solution to the problem of poaching in India.

China has perhaps 60 wild tigers left, Russia has maybe 400, and India has seen its tiger population crash to about 2,500.

Orthodox conservation plans based on protection have failed the tiger.

The answer may lie with tiger farming and removing the international ban on the sale of tiger parts. In June, a coalition of groups led by the Indian economist Barun Mitra called for a lift on the ban—arguing, simply, that when trade is outlawed, only outlaws trade.

Poaching is one of the biggest threats to the tiger's survival. But poaching was

once a problem for crocodile conservation too. Widespread crocodile farming and a CITES-sanctioned trade drove poachers out of the market. The same approach could be applied to tigers.

China has perhaps 5,000 tigers in captive facilities (the USA has closer to 10,000). Tigers aren't all that complicated to breed. But tiger farming is unpalatable to many people—it seems unethical, cold-blooded.

It isn't clear what makes tigers special. Various wild animals are farmed or ranches, including crocodiles, emus, parrots and butterflies. And in terms of cruelty, having wild tigers killed by traps or inefficient poisons in India far exceeds the fate of tigers in farms. It might be nicer to see tigers in the wild than on farms, but to make that happen we need to close down the black market.

The Chinese have an excellent monitoring system in place for captive tigers. Every captive tiger has been micro-chipped and has had blood taken for DNA profiling. The Chinese can follow a chain-of-custody from farms to customers. The technology to prove tiger products are legally sourced is in place. Selling poached tiger product faces major hurdles.

Sanctions for trading or possessing tiger parts are harsh and can include the death penalty. Smugglers are being caught, but demand for tiger parts and the lure of the very high black-market prices is keeping the trade alive.

The big market is for tiger bone, used in traditional Chinese medicine for treating bone diseases. Tiger farms in China report visitors and their families begging for bones for treating serious arthritis. Whether we believe that tiger-bone is effective or not is irrelevant—millions of Chinese consumers

do, trusting in centuries-old medical tradition. Demand has not been curbed by Western NGO campaigns condemning the practice, and the illegal supply of tiger bone has not been stopped by government bans. Wild tiger populations are paying the price.

Most black-market tiger bone is actually fake. It is expensive for smugglers to procure tiger bone in India, smuggle it through Nepal, over the Himalayas, through Tibet and into China's eastern regions. Shooting a local cow and passing its bones off as tiger is much easier. But this dependence on fakes does nothing to relieve the pressure on small wild tiger populations struggling to absorb losses from poaching.

At The Hague, the international community could have supported incentives for a range of commercial activities from eco-tourism, to breeding tigers and trade in body parts. Barun Mitra believes that the tiger can become economically viable and thereby survive in the wild—as well as continuing as a charismatic and culturally rich species.

An internationally sanctioned and regulated trade promised solutions to the major threats that tigers face. It promised to create opportunities for habitat protection and the revival of the species.

Farming and trading have worked for other species. In June, an opportunity for a new plan, a new approach to tiger conservation was lost. A growing tragedy for much of our wildlife is that we have become too timid to jettison ineffectual strategies when they don't work.

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