

Battle to save tigers intensifies with only 3,200 left on Earth

Efforts to save the tiger from extinction will be stepped up this year after the World Wide Fund for Nature placed the animal at the top its list of the most endangered species.

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Conservationists say there are just 3,200 tigers left in the world as the future of the species is threatened by poachers, destruction of their habitat and climate change.

The world population of tigers has fallen by 95 per cent in the past century.



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The WWF said it intends to intensify pressure to save the *Panthera tigris* by classifying it as the most at risk on its roster of 10 critically endangered animals.

It hopes to increase patrols and work with politicians to eradicate poaching and thwart illegal trade of tiger skins and body parts.

The wildlife charity also aims to work with governments to encourage more responsible forest management and compensation for farmers whose livestock are killed by tigers to avoid them being hunted.

Diane Walkington, head of species programme for the WWF in Britain, said: "This year has been designated the International Year of Biodiversity by the United Nations and so we have created a list of 10 critically important endangered animals that we believe will need special monitoring over the next 12 months.

"This year will also be the Chinese Year of the Tiger, and so we have put it at the top of our list. It will have special iconic importance.

"Of course, there are thousands of other species on the endangered list. However, there is particular importance in selecting a creature such as the tiger for special attention.

"To save the tiger, we have to save its habitat – which is also home to many other threatened species.

"So if we get things right and save the tiger, we will also save many other species at the same time."

Also on the WWF's endangered list are bluefin tuna, whose population has been devastated by overfishing, and leatherback turtles which are slaughtered by fishing vessels.

The polar bear, whose polar ice hunting ground is melting through climate change, also makes the top 10, as does the mountain gorilla, whose population has fallen to just 720 in the wild amid poaching and deforestation.

Tiger numbers have dwindled due to a combination of activities by humans.

Demand for their skins, still regarded as luxury items in some countries, has left them at the mercy of poachers who have increasingly targeted the animals. The threat is compounded by the market for their body parts, which are deemed to hold medicinal properties in some cultures.

Poachers also hunt many species which are tigers' prey, diminishing their natural food supply, and forcing them to attack farmers' livestock instead.

At the same time, destruction of forests for timber, agriculture and road building has forced tigers into ever smaller areas where they are increasingly vulnerable.

Climate change also poses a growing threat – 70 per cent of the Bengal tiger's remaining habitat in the Sunderbans mangrove forest may be lost within 50 years due to rising sea levels.

Of its nine main subspecies, three – the Bali, Caspian and Java tigers – are now extinct, while there has been no reliable sighting of a fourth, the South China tiger, for 25 years.

Only the Bengal, Amur, Indo-Chinese, Sumatran and Malayan tigers remain but their the numbers have been reduced to a few hundred per species, save the Bengal and Indo-Chinese.

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