

Saving the Tigers

by Cynthia Graber

When he was a young boy living in a village in southwest India, Ullas Karanth saw wildlife all around. Elephants and leopards roamed the mountains nearby. He spent hours bird-watching.

But as Ullas grew up, he saw forests cut down all around India. Because animals cannot survive when their habitats, or natural homes,



are destroyed, Ullas worried that the animals he loved would soon disappear. Indeed, tigers were already vanishing. In all his years of looking, Ullas had never seen one in the wild.

In the 1970s, other people in India also started worrying about the future of wildlife. The government passed laws and created nature reserves to protect animals. Ullas Karanth saw his first wild tiger in one of those

reserves more than 30 years ago. At that thrilling moment, Karanth knew that he would spend the rest of his life trying to save these majestic creatures.

Hunter or Hunted?

Tigers are native to many countries in Asia, including India, China, and Russia. Nobody knows exactly how many are alive today, though scientists agree that tiger numbers have fallen dramatically in the past 100 years. They are now one of the most endangered species in the world. In India, fewer than 1,500 remain.

Tigers evolved to hunt large prey such as deer, wild pigs, and wild cattle. A skillful stalker, the big cat prowls around in dense underbrush for up to an hour to sneak up on an unsuspecting young elephant or a sick antelope. Once it's crept close enough, the tiger pounces. It kills the animal

Tigers are the largest cats in the world, and they're so strong they can kill animals five times their size. And yet they are disappearing from the wild. Can we save them? Tiger researcher Dr. Ullas Karanth believes we can.





Bengal tigers, the type found in India, can weigh 500 pounds (227 kg). They roam the forests alone hunting, sometimes climbing trees if they feel threatened. They use their powerful jaws and sharp teeth to stab and hold prey by the neck. If two tigers meet, they may fight to settle whose territory it is.

who hunt them illegally. Poachers

hope to make money by

selling tiger skins and body parts, which people in China and Southeast Asia believe can cure a variety of diseases. In India too, some people think eating tiger meat promotes good health.

Room to Roam

But something worse than guns is killing tigers today: they are losing their homes. Tigers may live in green rain forests thick with huge trees, or in more open areas filled with high grasses. But there are two things a tiger cannot live without: a large area in which to roam and a good source of clean water.

by ripping its neck with muscular jaws and razor-like teeth.

But even with these skills, tigers are no match for the most ferocious hunters of all: humans.

For hundreds of years, men hunted tigers because the cats ate livestock, and sometimes even people. (Tiger attacks are rare—like most wild animals, tigers prefer to avoid humans.) Guns made killing even easier, and hunters in the 1800s and 1900s showed off their shooting skills by bagging the great cats.

Today, even though laws forbid killing tigers, some people still do. Most tigers are killed by poachers

Tiger, Tiger,
burning bright,
in the forest,
of the night!
I wish I may,
I wish I might,
be far away
when those
teeth bite!





Today, there are more tigers living in zoos than in the wild.

In India, some people share the forests with tigers, living in small villages, collecting wood for fires, and hunting deer and other wild animals. They compete with tigers for food. Areas that have been over-hunted are called empty forests. Without food to eat, tigers in empty forests starve.

People also compete with tigers for land. Farmers cut down forests and plow up grasslands to make bigger farms. Governments clear land to build roads and dams. The result is that only a tiny bit of land is left for the tigers.

“Freeing up space for tigers is the single biggest challenge we have,”

says Karanth. “We can’t have people grazing their livestock or going into the forests to kill deer and pig if we want to have tigers.”

To the Rescue

In the past, most wild animals existed without any human help. But with so few tigers left today, we have to step in and protect the animals to prevent them from disappearing forever. Karanth believes that science provides the best tools for saving these endangered cats. He hopes that studying tigers can give scientists and

Karanth (right) and his team gently place a radio collar on a tiger while it is fast asleep. Once the tiger is awake and back in the wild, the collar will send signals that let the scientists track the animal through the forest.

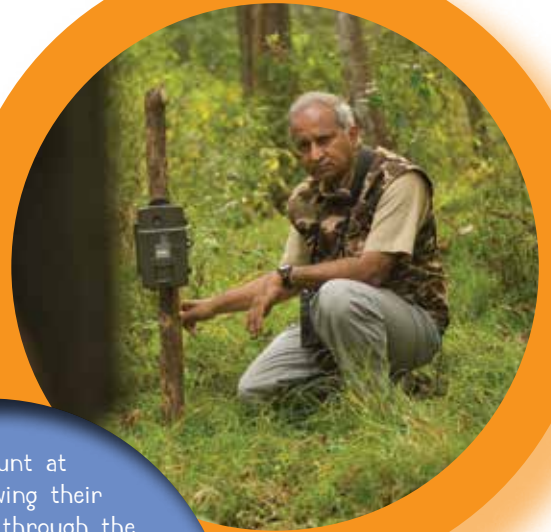


Save the trees!



Save the grasslands too!





Tigers hunt at night, following their favorite trails through the forest. To capture them on film, Karanth sets up cameras along the paths. As darkness falls, the tigers begin their nightly rounds. Silently, a family moves down a path, crossing in front of the camera's sensor. A quick flash, and the camera has taken a perfect portrait of the prowling predator and her cubs.

the tiger through the forest, learning how far it goes and what food it eats.

conservationists the information they need to work with governments to save the tigers and their forests.

Karanth's first project was to count the animals that tigers eat. The availability of tiger food told him how many tigers might be able to survive in the forest.

Then, of course, Karanth needed to count tigers. But how? One way is to collar them—not an easy thing to do! From up in a tree near a tiger kill, Karanth darts the tiger with a mild sleeping drug. Once it's asleep, he places a radio collar around its neck. That collar allows him to track

Another way Karanth counts tigers is to set up special cameras along animal paths. When a tiger crosses in front of a sensor, it triggers a camera that snaps a picture. Every tiger has a different stripe pattern. Computers can scan the photographs, identify each tiger by its stripes, and count individuals.

Wild tigers hiding in the jungle can be very hard to spot. It's easier to find their poop, or scat. Poop contains tiny traces of DNA from the tiger who left it. So by looking at scat from a particular area, researchers

Could you put on this beautiful decorative collar, please? It's for my science project.



Each zebra has a special stripy pattern, too.



can track individuals and count how many there are.

By counting tigers and their food, Karanth has found that, although many tigers die every year, many cubs are being born. As long as the mothers have enough space to hunt in and prey to eat, the cubs will have enough food to survive. If the cubs survive to become adults, the number of tigers will increase.

The Indian government is using Karanth's findings to make plans to save the tigers. They've outlawed hunting in many areas, hired guards to protect tigers, and protected some forests as tiger habitat. It's also important to find good jobs outside the forests for people who today live inside the forests, so they won't be tempted to hunt tigers or kill the animals the tigers need for food.

Karanth and other researchers will keep watching and counting to see if the conservation plans are working. So far, they think they are—India's wild tiger population is now the largest in the world. But the World Wildlife Federation estimates that in the whole world, there are only about 3,200 wild tigers left.

Not Too Late

Ullas Karanth believes that we should protect

tigers because every species on the planet is connected. That means that in some way, we too depend on tigers, as we do on all species in the web of life. He explains that if people were to destroy the famous Indian building called the Taj Mahal, it could be rebuilt. "But once we destroy all these intricate ecological webs," he says, "there's no bringing them back!"

"What we do today can have a huge influence," Karanth says with enthusiasm. "Kids shouldn't lose hope, because we still have an opportunity to save the world's tigers!" 🐅

Just like a house cat, a mother tiger carries her babies by holding them by the loose skin at the scruff of their necks. Tiger cubs are born in litters of two to four. They remain with their mother until they are about two years old, when they can hunt for themselves.

