

CITES AT WORK



International Cooperation and the Comeback of the Siberian Tiger

A Report by
Global Survival Network
with

Russian State Committee for Environmental Protection • U.S. Department of Interior
David Shepherd Conservation Foundation • Tusk Force • I-Mei Foundation
Ouwehands Dierenpark • Hornocker Wildlife Institute

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Primorsky Territory Committee for Environmental Protection
U.S. Department of Interior
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Hornocker Wildlife Institute (USA)
David Shepherd Conservation Foundation (UK)
Tusk Force (UK)
I-Mei Foundation (Taiwan)
Ouwehands Dierenpark (Holland)
Stichting Tigris (Holland)

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A LETTER TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES OF FLORA AND FAUNA (CITES)

Since the early 1990's, when scores of tigers were being poached annually in the Russian Far East, home range of the Siberian tiger (also known as the Amur tiger), the Russian State Committee on Environmental Protection, the Global Survival Network, and its Siberian Tiger Support Coalition, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Hornocker Wildlife Institute, and the U.S. Department of the Interior have all brought considerable financial and technical resources and assistance to the campaign to halt poaching of the Siberian tiger.

Enclosed is a joint report on the efforts since the last meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna to conserve the Siberian tiger in the wild. These efforts, sometimes separate, sometimes in concert, were undertaken in just the past three years by both Russian and American, governmental and non-governmental organizations.

From those grave days in the early 1990's, when Russia's shrinking tiger population was generally estimated at 200-250 individuals in the wild, the 1996 tiger census indicating the existence of 360 adult tigers in the Russian Far East provides demonstrable proof that not only can there be a positive impact, but that nations can work together, both government-to-government and in public-private partnerships, in the conservation of a critically endangered species such as the Siberian tiger.

Victor Danilov-Danilyan
Chairman
Russian State Committee on Environmental Protection

Bruce Babbitt
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior

Steven Galster
Executive Director
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Brian Atwood
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Maurice Hornocker
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROTECTING CITES APPENDIX I SPECIES FROM COMMERCIAL poaching and smuggling has historically proven difficult, but not impossible. Developing countries, in particular, have waged numerous uphill battles against organized, well-equipped poaching gangs and illegal traders, sometimes to no avail. As a result, a pessimistic view has developed among some governments that successful protection of endangered and threatened species requires more money and time than they can afford. The case of Russia's Siberian tiger (*panthera tigris altaica*), one of the world's most critically endangered subspecies of the decade, demonstrates that CITES, when implemented effectively, can protect wildlife from black market commercial forces—even in a country with serious economic and crime problems. Furthermore, as this report shows, CITES implementation under such harsh conditions need not be excessively expensive or time-consuming. The keys to this success have been:

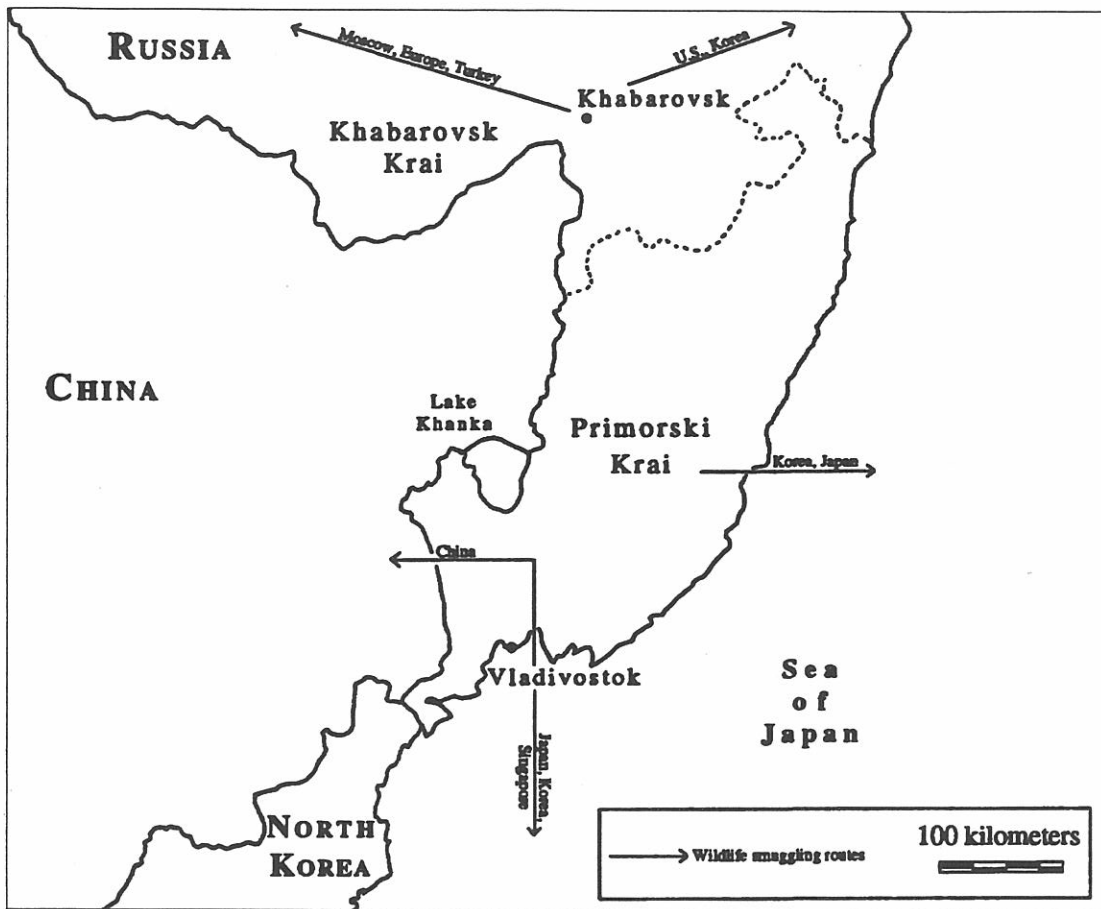
- A locally designed protection program expanded and partly financed by international experts and donors;
- Timely, coordinated financial transfers made directly to program implementers;
- Concurrent efforts in the market place to reduce consumption; and
- Public awareness of the tiger's plight.

Between 1990-93, Russia lost approximately 37% of its tiger population to commercial poachers, leaving an estimated 250 individuals to roam the forests of the Far East. Russian and foreign wildlife experts considered extinction a possibility by the year 2,000. As with other subspecies of *panthera tigris*, the critical situation facing the Siberian tiger (known to the Russians as the Amur tiger) was relayed to the international public through press reports and via CITES. In 4 consecutive meetings between 1993 and 1994, CITES gave high priority to the plight of the tiger. In March, 1993 the CITES Standing Committee passed a resolution (SC 28.15) warning tiger consuming states that if they did not take action to curb the illegal trade in tiger parts they could be subject to sanctions by CITES member countries. The next two Standing Committee meetings reviewed progress made by tiger consuming states. Then, in November, 1994, the CITES Conference of the Parties unanimously supported resolution 9.13, which

"CALLS UPON all governments and intergovernmental organizations, international aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations to provide, as a matter of urgency, funds and other assistance to stop the illegal trade in tigers and tiger parts and derivatives and to ensure the survival of the tiger in the wild."



▲ Threatened by commercial trade in its body parts, the Siberian Tiger is becoming a CITES success story.



▲ The Siberian tiger's range is in close proximity to traditional tiger consuming markets.

SEVERAL GOVERNMENTS, NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs), AND corporations heeded these consecutive emergency calls. By 1995 an international partnership had formed in the Russian Far East to halt the decline of the Siberian tiger. This partnership included the Russian government, Global Survival Network (GSN) and its Siberian Tiger Support Coalition (see back of report for list of members), Hornocker Wildlife Institute (HWI), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the U.S. government, and the Exxon Corporation. HWI designed a scientific program to provide a through picture of the ecological requirements of Russia's remaining tigers through radio telemetric technology; this information is also being used to map the tiger's precise habitat needs for its future survival. The Russian government created a specialized anti-poaching program to protect the tigers from poachers and root out wildlife smugglers. Foreign NGOs, led by the Global Survival Network and WWF, financed this program. Separately, the United States and CITES provided training and technical assistance for Russian members of the tiger protection program. CITES and the United States also constructively engaged tiger consuming states to help improve CITES implementation by working to curb consumption of tigers. Less than three years after CITES resolution 9.13, the result is a stabilized population of Siberian tigers.

A survey taken in 1996 indicated that the Siberian tiger population had climbed to 360 adult tigers and approximately 80-100 more tiger cubs. This feat was achieved during Russia's post-perestroika transition, a period marked by widespread criminal activity, in Primorsky Krai, a territory in close proximity to the world's largest tiger consuming markets. A relatively minor outbreak of tiger poaching in 1997 highlights the importance of continued CITES enforcement. The total cost of enforcement efforts aimed at reducing tiger poaching and trading from 1993 to the present was less than \$750,000. This report provides a summary of this successful species recovery program in 4 distinct stages of its development.

BACKGROUND

AT THE START OF THIS CENTURY, EIGHT SUBSPECIES OF TIGERS, TOTALING ABOUT 100,000 animals, were found between the Caspian Sea and Bali. Today, the global population of wild tigers may be less than 5,000. Three subspecies—the Balinese, Caspian, and Javan—have gone extinct. The primary cause of this decline has been the illegal international trade in tiger body parts. In some countries, one tiger skin can sell for \$15,000 as a decoration. One kilogram of tiger bone, ground down to administer as a medicine or aphrodisiac, can fetch up to \$2,000 on the black market. The blood, meat, penis, and whiskers of the tiger are also lucrative products when sold as ingredients of traditional Chinese medicine. The value of the Siberian tiger's body is the highest on the market.

The Siberian tiger has been on CITES Appendix I for the last 3 decades. Following a serious decline in Russia's tiger population in the 1930's and 1940's, due to over-hunting, well-planned Soviet wildlife law enforcement and management strategies contributed to a steady recovery. By the 1980s, the population was considered stable and still rising, with approximately 400 individuals located throughout Primorsky Krai (home to 85% of the tiger population) and Khabarovsk Krai (home to 15% of the population) by 1988. Tight Soviet borders minimized illegal cross-border trade in wildlife. It was very difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to smuggle tiger parts from Russia to another country. However, the breakdown of the Soviet Union caused a breakdown in law and borders. Russia's wildlife became exposed to international market forces. Suddenly the high-priced Siberian tiger was vulnerable to professional local hunters eager to earn hard currency from foreign tiger consumers. Between 1990 and 1994, an estimated 50 tigers a year were poached to feed the international underground market for tiger parts. Some tiger experts in Russia's Far East predicted that their nation's coveted cat would become extinct in the wild by the turn of the century.

Exacerbating the situation for the Siberian tiger was the lack of resources which Russian environmental officials could access to protect endangered species. During the post-perestroika transition, the Ministry of Environment experienced severe budget cuts, forcing its local branches across Russia (called "Ecology Committees") to finance an increasing percentage of their work. Consequently, wildlife rangers across Russia were either laid off or had their salaries reduced. Those rangers who braved the budget cuts were left with few resources to fend against well-equipped commercial poachers. In Primorsky Territory, local hunters—hungry for meat—ravaged the population of wild boar, elk, and other ungulates of the taiga forest. Opportunistic hunters and self-made middlemen—hungry for money—targeted wildlife whose parts yield high profits: bears for gallbladders, musk deer for musk glands, wild ginseng for their roots, and tigers for their pelts, organs, and bones.

With decades of wildlife conservation experience behind them, the Ministry of Environment (recently renamed to State Committee for Environmental Protection) and Primorsky Territory Ecology Committee developed a plan to reduce poaching, but this plan required money. Foreign assistance was required. Answering the call from CITES to provide such international assistance, GSN



▲ A Russian wildlife ranger holds the remains of 1 of approximately 50 tigers poached in 1993.

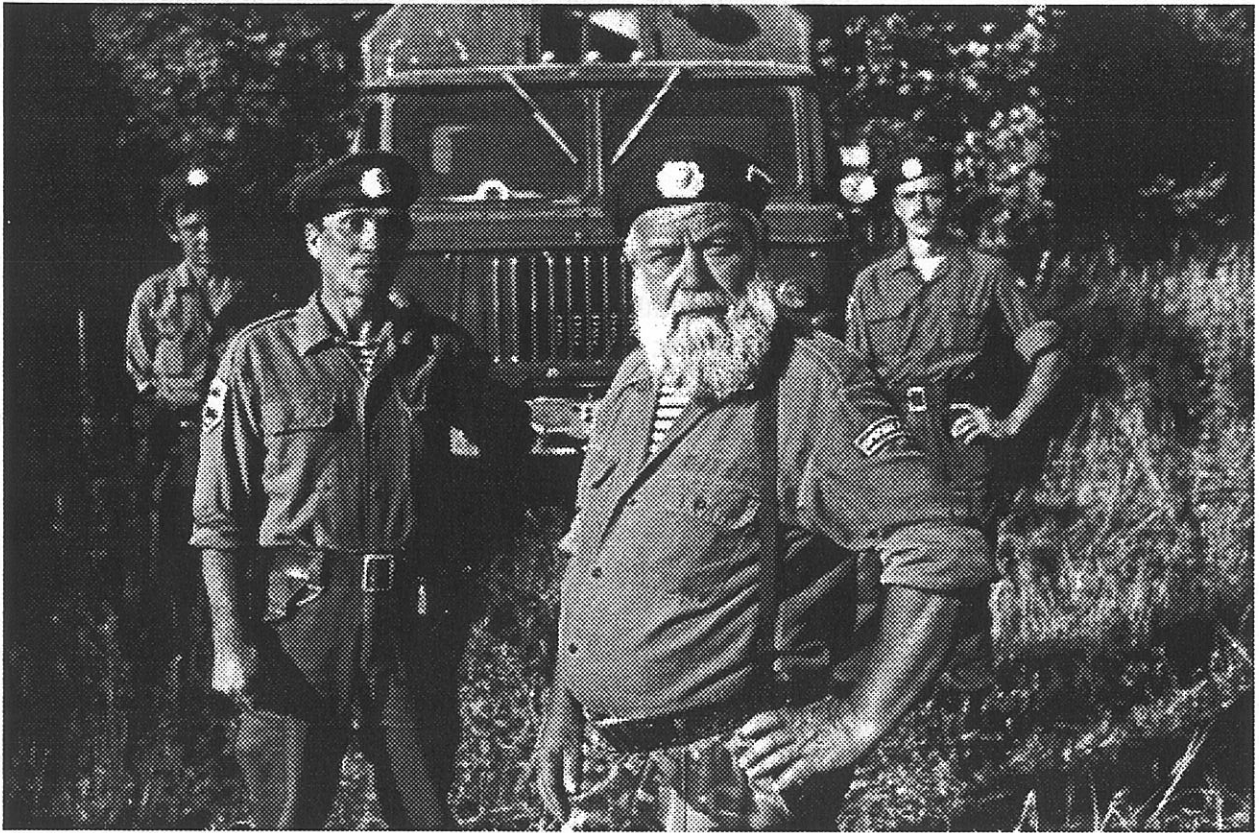
and WWF reviewed and helped expand the Russian tiger protection plan, and agreed to finance it. GSN enlisted the support of other NGO's around the world, most notably the David Shepherd Conservation Foundation (UK), Tusk Force (UK), and the I-Mei Foundation (Taiwan). The objectives of the plan were to:

- Stabilize the tiger population by the year 2,000. "Stable" was defined as a measurably increasing population;
- Secure a sound habitat for a stable population of tigers well into the next century. "Sound" habitat was defined as consisting of good tree cover, food (healthy prey base), water, and "connectivity" (ecologically sound corridors);

To reach these two objectives, it was necessary to design a strategy to overcome the various threats to the tiger, which included:

- Commercial poaching for the underground market in skins, bones, and organs outside of Russia;
- Poaching of the tiger's prey base, mainly wild boar, elk, deer and other ungulates for local consumption; and
- Habitat loss, caused by legal and illegal logging throughout the taiga.

The essence of Russia's strategic plan to overcome this threat was a mobile anti-poaching operation. Although the long-term survival of the tiger depends on preserving adequate habitat, the short-term threat of poaching needed to be addressed immediately. Specifically, the Russians recommended the development of mobile anti-poaching teams in order to: (a) maintain a periodic presence in areas no longer protected by rangers; and (b) follow up on reports of poaching and smuggling. In exchange for financial support of this plan, the government agreed to establish a new, specialized "Tiger Department" (code-named Operation "Amba") within the Ministry of Environment's branch in Primorsky Krai. In addition to Amba, anti-poaching teams were established in several national parks. With foreign support, the Russians created five tiger protection teams—three mobile, and two stationed in national parks. The average team consists of 4 rangers, each specially trained in criminal inspection, weapons use, environmental law, and forest survival. Each mobile team is also equipped with at least one military style truck, a jeep, hand-held radios, uniforms, outdoor sleeping gear, cooking equipment, arms, and a monthly allowance for gasoline, food, and informant incentive money.



▲ Rangers from Operation "Amba,"
Russia's Tiger Protection Force.

▼ Properly equipped, thanks to international aid, Amba rangers are able to patrol all areas of the tiger's range.



STAGE I: 1993-1994

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY WAS TO PUT THE POACHER AND SMUGGLER—WHO AT THE TIME WERE ON A profitable offensive—on the strategic defensive, and to raise the costs and stakes of killing and trading tigers. Shifting the strategic equation against the poacher and smuggler was an ambitious plan which required the following tactical elements:

- **Using the element of surprise:** Amba patrols were quietly deployed to 3 distinct areas of the taiga at once. Rangers would randomly check vehicles coming out of the forest as well as hunters walking inside the forest. This activity would be concentrated in 3 to 4 days. Then, without a word, rangers would depart for a new area, maybe to return the next week, sometimes the next month.
- **Developing an intelligence network:** During these patrols, Amba rangers would inform local citizens and authorities about their mission, inviting them to provide information on poachers and traders. A surprising number of people stepped forward. Over time a network of informants was formed.
- **Using the media:** As the Russians say, "bad news has wings" and Amba was bad news for poachers and smugglers. Besides spreading word about Amba by mouth, media coverage was used to maximize publicity of Amba's presence.

The winter of 1993-94 was only slightly better for tigers than the previous 2 winters. Amba rangers found themselves turning up at the crime scene only after the crime had been committed. Five poached tigers—and signs of other poached tigers—were found throughout the Krai. Amba Commander Vladimir I. Shetinin estimated that the number of dead tigers discovered by rangers represented only 10-20% of the actual number killed.

Amba investigations were conducted "passively" during the first year. Rangers were not yet prepared to act against illegal tiger traders. The connections between poacher, middleman, buyer, and the Mafia were still unclear. Information was gathered from undercover informants and new personal contacts from within rural communities. Only rarely did Amba provide money for information. Many villagers and hunters were keen to help catch commercial poachers, who were not only killing tigers but also deer, wild boar, and other animals which both tigers and local people fed on for subsistence.

From these initial passive investigations, Amba had learned 3 important lessons:

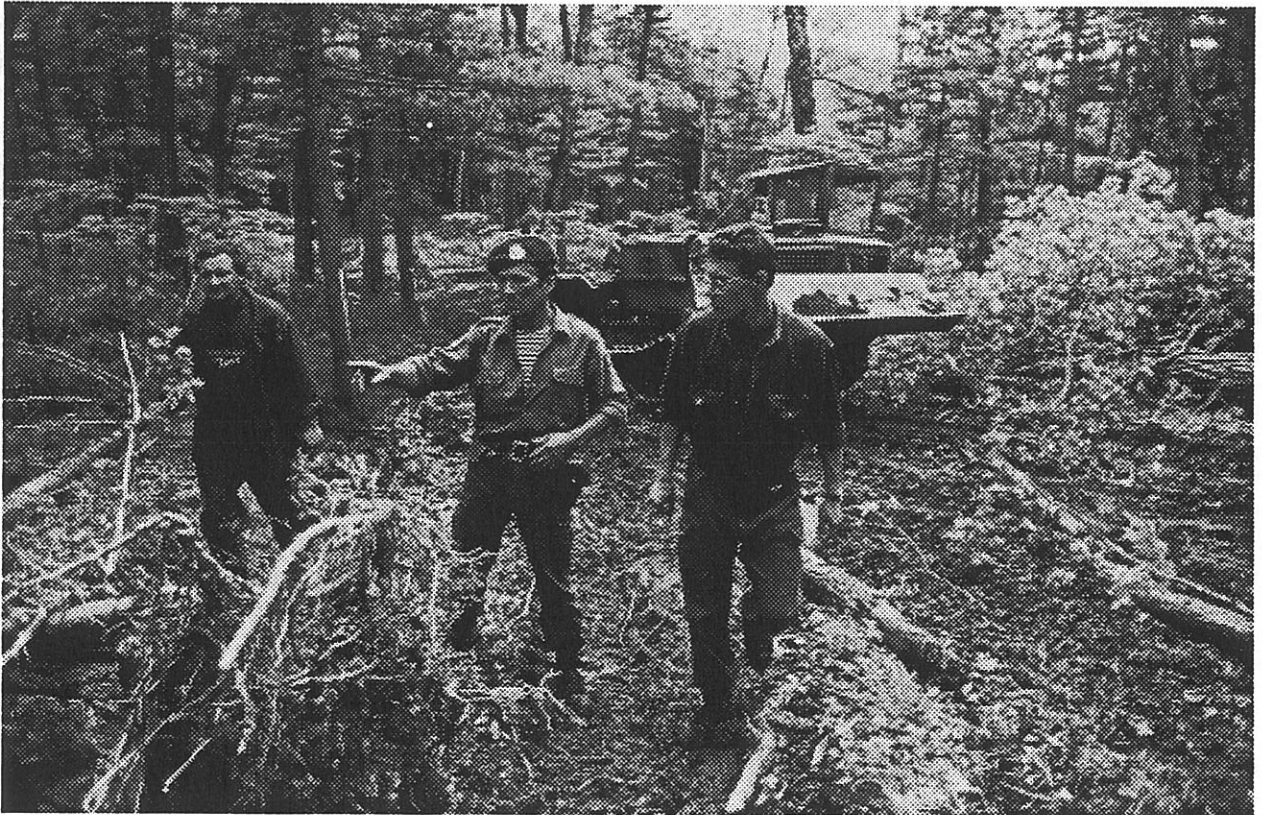
1. **The line between the poacher and the market was becoming increasingly direct:** Some Russians smugglers had supplanted foreigners as middlemen;
2. **Amba needed its own "roof",** preferably from within the government. Amba could not yet rely on the police and courts to back them up in the field;
3. **Networking paid off:** By talking with local citizens and authorities, Amba rangers were building up a network of support and information. Not only through the media, but also through these direct contacts, Amba was becoming known throughout Primorsky Krai.

The entire costs of initiating and running Operation Amba and its 3 mobile anti-poaching teams for the first year was approximately \$150,000. It is estimated that poaching was reduced by 40% from the previous year.



▲ Amba rangers on a routine vehicle inspection outside a national park.

▼ An Amba ranger discovers an illegal logging operation.



STAGE II: 1994-1995

BY LATE AUGUST, 1994, A GSN SURVEY TAKEN AMONG AMBA AGENTS AND TIGER EXPERTS revealed that the volume of tiger bone trading had decreased. The main reason provided was the sudden appearance of Department Tiger (Amba) rangers. Tiger skin trading remained steady. As anti-poaching efforts began to take root, GSN and HWI took aim at the second part of the original objective: securing sound tiger habitat for the future. Although the Siberian tiger was still highly endangered due to poaching, the rate of logging and hunting in prime tiger habitat was alarming. By 1994, negotiations were launched in Moscow with advisors to the Prime Minister in order to obtain a governmental measure of protection for tiger habitat in the Russian Far East.

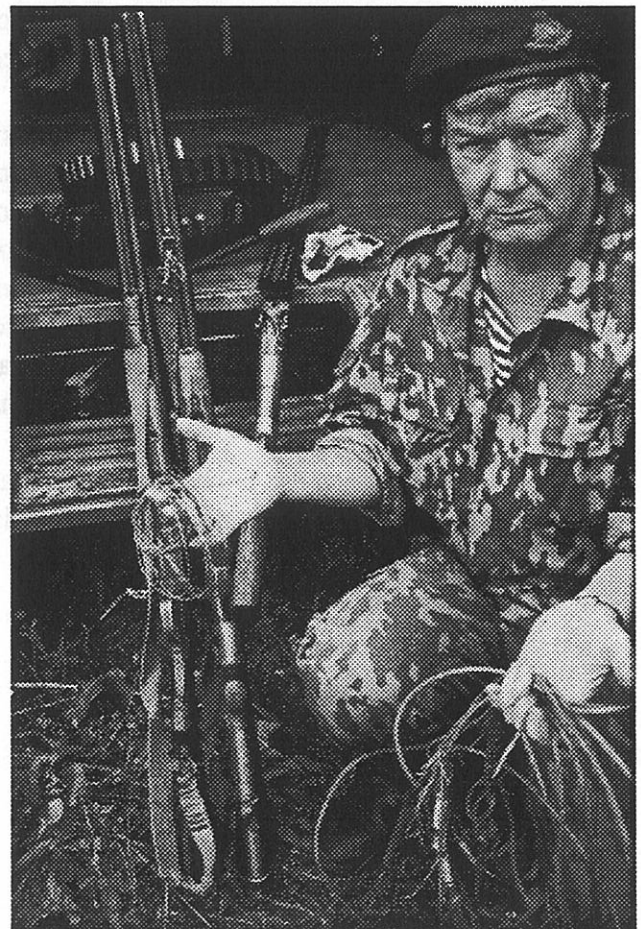
On the anti-poaching front, Amba rangers set out to find allies within local law enforcement agencies. Their investigations revealed that poaching gangs and smugglers were too well connected to the Russian Mafia for Amba to fight alone. Thus, rangers looked to develop better relations with local police and FSB (former KGB) officers. Better ties were secured with police and FSB officers in the city of Ussurisk, a hub of wildlife smuggling activity. Ussurisk is connected by road to the Peoples Republic of China, which lies only 2 hours drive to the west. In June 1995, Amba and the FSB cooperated on the successful tracking of a vehicle carrying sea cucumbers and a tiger skin from Ussurisk to China via the border checkpoint, Poltovka. However, Russian Customs officials working the border failed to cooperate in the investigation. While the skin was confiscated, no one was prosecuted for the incident. Clearly, better interagency coordination of wildlife enforcement was needed.

Other Amba investigations netted one tiger poacher in the Bikin Valley, the northern part of the tiger's range, and nearly led to the arrest of a poaching gang near Arseniev in the southern part of the tiger's range. The latter investigation was slowed when Amba sought assistance from police and prosecutors in Vladivostok. The poaching gang was reportedly involved in smuggling narcotics and arms which led police to take over the investigation. No further information about the criminal group was passed to Amba. Amba confirmed the foreign destination of smuggled tiger parts in only one of its investigations.

The total cost of anti-poaching operations for the year was \$175,000. It is estimated that poaching was reduced by 32% from the previous year.



▲ Amba rangers with weapons confiscated from poachers. ►



STAGE III: 1995-1996

ON AUGUST 7, 1995 RUSSIAN PRIME MINISTER VICTOR S. CHERNOMYRDIN ISSUED National Decree number 795 "On Saving the Siberian Tiger and other Endangered Fauna and Flora of the Russian Far East." This high-level political support for tiger protection sent a clear message to Russian law enforcement agencies and courts. Russian courts had previously shown little interest in tiger poaching, agreeing to hear only two tiger poaching cases between 1992-95, and no cases relating to tiger smuggling during the same period. Between 1995-96, 7 people had been indicted for tiger poaching and trading. Furthermore, the Decree was a piece of paper that Amba could show local police and prosecutors to justify their work and to gain further support for it.

With increased political support, Amba investigators turned up the heat on wildlife traders in Ussurisk, which informants consistently pointed to as the hub of tiger smuggling activity. Over the course of the year, information was gathered on a ring of tiger dealers around Ussurisk who had reportedly stockpiled 15 tiger skins. In the summer of 1996, based on a tip from a local hunter, Amba and local police lured one of the dealers into position for a successful arrest. He pointed the finger at another dealer, who was also caught and indicted. A third dealer identified as a tiger trader escaped due to a blown undercover operation between Amba and Ussurisk police.

Recognizing that interagency coordination was still lacking, and that Amba's ability to win court cases against poachers needed improvement, Russian officials invited wildlife law enforcement trainers from the United States Department of Interior to address Amba rangers and Russian Customs authorities in Primorsky Territory. In June 1996, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service inspectors conducted a seminar on CITES implementation, species identification, anti-smuggling techniques, and anti-poaching. A CITES manual was provided in Russian as well. Shortly after these training sessions concluded, the CITES Secretariat provided a brief course in Moscow to Russian wildlife officials, including Amba's deputy assistant.

The total costs of running Operation Amba for year 3 was approximately \$175,000. U.S. Government training was an additional \$25,000. It is estimated that tiger poaching was reduced by 25% from the previous year.



International trade and International cooperation:

- ▲ Above, a Siberian tiger skull confiscated by U.S. Fish & Wildlife service agents at Los Angeles International Airport.
- ▼ Below, U.S. Department of Interior officials and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service agents provide training to and exchange ideas with Amba rangers.

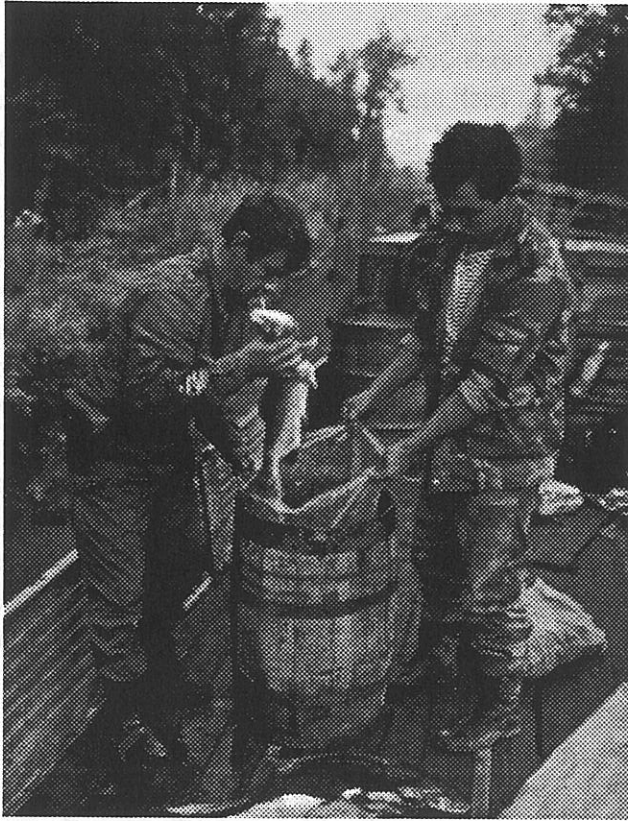


STAGE IV: 1996-1997

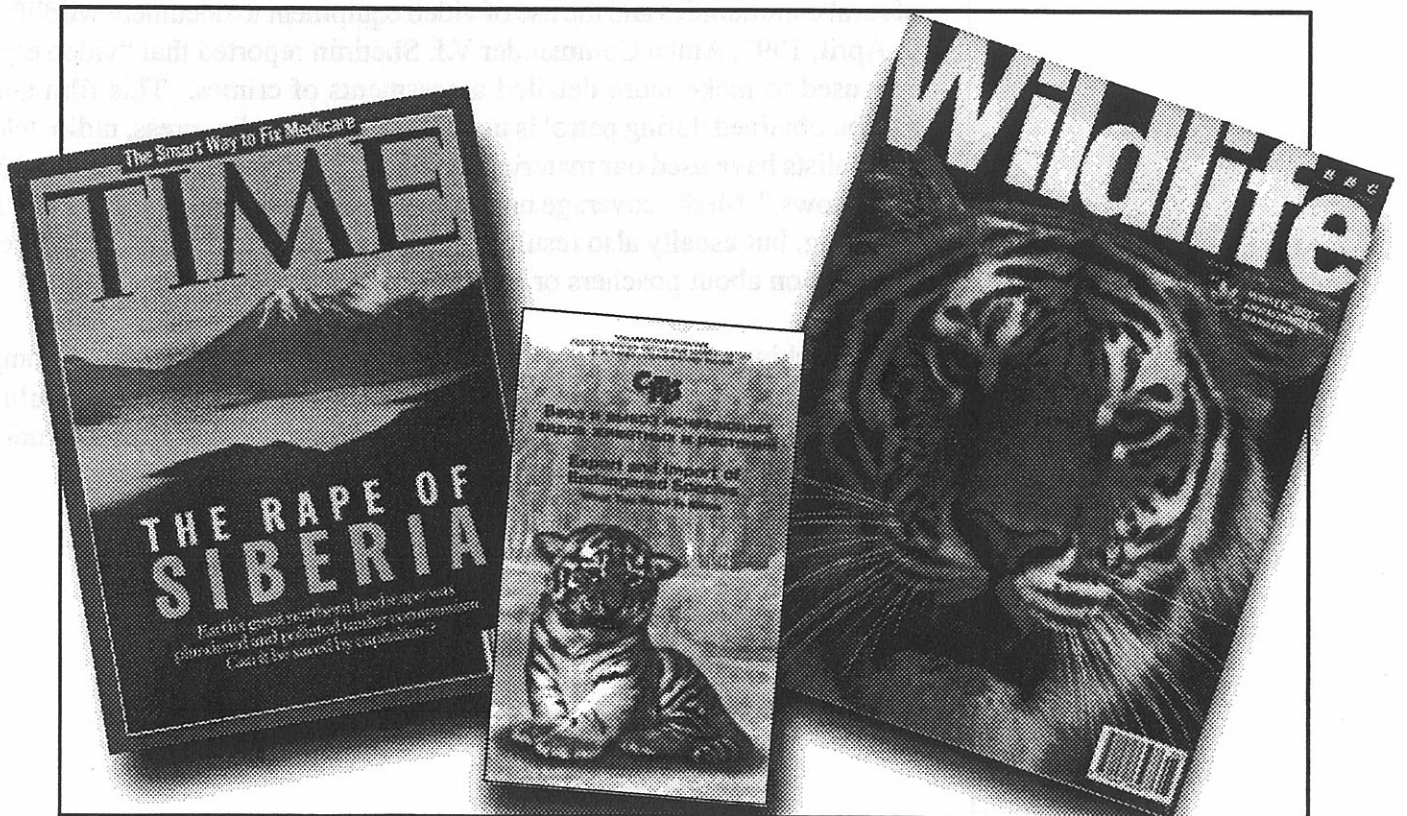
INTERAGENCY COOPERATION AND COORDINATION IMPROVED BETWEEN LATE 1996 AND EARLY 1997. Twice in 1996, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agents of the U.S. Department of Interior provided training on wildlife law enforcement to the Amba rangers and Russian Customs officers. As a result, Amba investigations have improved overall in 1997. When Amba began operations, some of the tiger dealers' internal smuggling routes had been discovered, but the actual destination for the skins and bones of poached tigers were rarely confirmed; cooperation from police and Customs officials working the border points was lacking. In the first 3 months of 1997, however, investigators discovered a major tiger skin trading route from Khabarovsk to Japan by way of Vladivostok. They also discovered a tiger skin channel by sea from Vladivostok to South Korea. Another tiger skin and set of bones was discovered by the Customs Service, which called Amba for help, on a boat set to leave the port of Nakhodka. On April 11, 1997, officers working for Russian Customs, police and Amba cooperated on an arrest of a tiger dealer who had attempted to smuggle a tiger skin through Vladivostok's International Airport. Investigations over the past year have also detected other endangered fauna and flora being smuggled into and out of Primorsky Territory. The illegal trade in Amur leopard skins, snow leopard skins, musk deer glands, and bear gallbladders are some of the highly priced derivatives frequently discovered by investigators. Wild ginseng, usually en route to China, is routinely confiscated by Amba investigators, who have also noticed foreign wildlife being smuggled into the Far East, most notably chimpanzees and reptiles.

Public relations has also steadily improved, thanks largely to regular patrolling of rural communities and the use of video equipment to document wildlife crimes. In April, 1997, Amba Commander V.I. Shetinin reported that "video equipment was used to make more detailed assessments of crimes. This film and information obtained during patrol is used in the mass media -press, radio, television. Journalists have used our materials in 4 articles, 2 radio broadcasts, and 3 television shows." Media coverage not only raises local awareness about the threat of poaching, but usually also results in telephone calls to Amba from citizens with information about poachers or smugglers.

Anti-poaching operations for 1997 are estimated to cost \$175,000. A comprehensive tiger survey released in late 1996 revealed that the population of Siberian tigers (adults and sub adults) had increased to more than 400 individuals.



- ▲ Amba rangers target poachers of all wildlife. Above, rangers examine a confiscated haul of salmon.
- ▼ Below, international and domestic media coverage has raised awareness about the plight of Siberian tigers, as well as financial and technical support for tiger protection efforts.



MOVING AHEAD: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

IN LESS THAN 4 YEARS, FOR LESS THAN \$750,000, THE SIBERIAN TIGER HAS BEEN BROUGHT back from the brink of extinction. Looking back at what went right and what went wrong with the development and execution of this species recovery program, ten clear lessons emerge. These lessons, which may be applicable to other species recovery efforts, include:

- 1. The core idea of a species recovery program must be locally designed;**
- 2. The species recovery program must enjoy local community support and participation;**
- 3. The species recovery program must also have the support and cooperation of local law enforcement agencies;**
- 4. The species recovery program must have high-level political support;**
- 5. The species recovery program must have communication ties with foreign conservation organizations and law enforcement agencies.**
- 6. Effective public relations must be part of the species recovery program;**
- 7. Rangers must have proper communications equipment;**
- 8. Rangers must be trained in investigative techniques and wildlife law;**
- 9. Rangers must have the potential of being mobile at all times;**
- 10. Foreign assistance for the species recovery program must be coordinated and provided in a timely manner.**



▲ U.S. and Russian Wildlife rangers in Primorsky Krai following a joint training session in 1996.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

THE FOLLOWING THREE RECOMMENDATIONS NEED TO BE ENACTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL community, with facilitation from CITES to ensure continued protection of the Siberian tiger:

- 1. Wildlife law enforcement officers from Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan must be brought together to discuss issues relating to illegal trade;**
- 2. The Russian government, the United Nations, and donor agencies must cooperate to ensure that prime tiger habitat in the Russian Far East receives permanent protection priority for sustained extraction of resources, such as logs and wildlife, with a core network of purely protected areas;**
- 3. Potential donors for Siberian tiger protection efforts must contact the Russian State Committee for Environmental Protection to maximize the effectiveness of donations and to avoid duplicating ongoing efforts:**

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Ouwehands Dierenpark (Holland)
Stichting Tigris (Holland)**