

ALTA Conservation Report

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ALTA

The Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA) is a coalition of 12 organisations that work cooperatively to ensure a future for Amur tigers and leopards in the wild. ALTA partners are:

1. Phoenix Fund (Russia)
2. Wildlife Conservation Society (Russia/USA)
3. AMUR (UK/Russia)
4. 21st Century Tiger (UK)
5. IFAW Russia
6. Moscow Zoo
7. Alertis (Holland)
8. Barbara Delano Foundation (USA)
9. David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (UK)
10. Zoological Society of London
11. Tigris Foundation (Holland)
12. WildAid (USA/Thailand).

The main implementing organisations of ALTA are WCS and Phoenix Fund. Activities by ALTA are also supported by external sources, most notably the Save The Tiger Fund (USA) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

1. Tiger Conference Khabarovsk (Michiel Hötte)

An international conference on Amur tiger conservation was held in Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East from 25 to 27 September 2003. The aims of the conference, sponsored by the Save The Tiger Fund, were twofold: 1) to evaluate the progress since the first international conference on Amur tiger conservation was held in Khabarovsk 10 years ago and 2) to develop strategies for future conservation efforts. WCS and the Khabarovsk Wildlife Foundation were the main organisers of the conference. ALTA partners Sarah Christie (ZSL/21st Century Tiger), Masha Vorontsova (IFAW Russia), Sergei Bereznuk (Phoenix Fund), Dale Miquelle and Nickolai Kazakov (WCS), and Michiel Hötte (Tigris Foundation) participated. Presentations were given by Nikolai (Tiger Friendly Certification), Sergei (education) and Dale (Land-use and protected area network planning). Sarah gave a presentation analysing tiger conservation funding in Russia based on the information in the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist's Group online Cat Projects Database, which she manages, as well as a presentation written by Sharon Miller (Tiger conservation and business). Sharon was absent, because of Tiger and Leopard Day in Moscow. A conference report with all presentations will be available soon. One of the main conclusions of the conference was that Amur tiger conservation is successful and forms a model for tiger conservation elsewhere. A major achievement is that Amur tiger numbers are stable (while other subspecies decline). Anti-poaching organisations such as Inspection Tiger (initiated

by WildAid) succeeded in curbing the poaching crisis that seemed to make extinction of the Amur tiger imminent in the early nineties. Another main achievement is that we now know more about Amur tigers than about any other subspecies of tiger, thanks to the research performed by WCS in co-operation with Russian scientists. The conference resolutions included a recommendation to the Ministry of Natural Resources (responsible for conservation) to establish an advisory body for Amur tiger and leopard conservation with representatives from local authorities from Primorsky and Khabarovsk Krai as well as the scientific and NGO community.

2. Phoenix takes over LSC secretary position (Michiel Hötte)

Olga Uphyrkina has resigned as secretary of the international Amur Leopard Steering Committee (LSC). Phoenix offered to take over the position, with director Sergei Bereznuik acting as contact person. The offer has been accepted and we are confident that this change will help to make the LSC more effective.

3. Transboundary Reserve Russia/China (Michiel Hötte)

Dale Miquelle, Sergei Bereznuik and Michiel Hötte participated in a 3 day conference in Hunchun city in China about the creation of a United Nations "Transboundary Reserve" (TBR) in the Amur leopard range. The TBR will include all protected areas in the Russian part of Southwest Primorye as well as the Hunchun reserve in China located along the Russian border. In Russia not only PAs in forested (leopard) habitat will be included, but also a protected wetland that is important for migratory birds (most of all cranes) and Russia's only marine reserve. Hopefully, at some future date, PAs in North Korea can be included as well.

It was decided at the conference not to enlarge the existing PAs that are to be included in the TBR, nor to strengthen their protection regimes. This modest approach increases the chance that all Russian and Chinese authorities involved will accept the TBR plan (local and national authorities need to endorse the TBR, before the UN can endorse it). However, as a result of this decision, the only formal change that the TBR will bring is an additional name. This does not mean that the TBR will not produce advantages. We expect that the TBR (process) will:

- 1) attract new donors
- 2) give an additional impulse to co-operation between Russian and Chinese scientists and authorities
- 3) make it easier to get national and international attention for threats to areas included in the TBR

But I am somewhat sceptical. Firstly, the contacts between Russians and Chinese scientists and conservationists were already developing well before the plan for a UN TBR was formed. Secondly, it is still doubtful that the TBR can be realised due to lack of co-operation from local Russian and national Chinese authorities. Thirdly, the process is very costly. It involves a large UN staff, a circus of national and international consultants and national focal points (WWF RFE for Russia and the Hunchun reserve for China). The first step alone, a feasibility study, cost \$225,000. It produced nothing new; all documents are fully based on existing reports, most of them produced as part of the TumenNet Program, and the maps produced were based on data and maps from the Russian GIS laboratory that operates mainly with funds provided by WCS, 21st Century Tiger and Tigris.

4. Moving forward on the political front (Sharon Miller)

As we all know conservation cannot take place in a vacuum; without the active support of the political and business world conservation is far less successful. AMUR has been building up business support for tiger and leopard conservation and has recently received quite a lot of interest from the Russian business press. We are now moving forward with introducing Russian companies to the idea of conservation partnerships. At the same time ALTA partners on the ground in the Russian Far East have started to explore the potential of building partnerships with the local business community.

Political support is at the heart of our programme – we need support both from the administration in Primorski and Khabarovsk Krai and vitally from the Federal Government in Moscow. In the past couple of years there have been new incumbents at the top level in both the Russian Federation Ministry of Natural Resources and in Primorski Krai Administration. ALTA has therefore been keen to establish relations with these new political leaders but until recently progress had been slow. Recently, however, we have had some positive developments on these fronts – with meetings between representatives of ALTA and the Deputy Minister for the Environment in Moscow and also the Vice Governor of Primorski Krai in Moscow. Both politicians have a positive approach to our work and are

keen to become more involved personally and have directed their administrations to support the work of ALTA more closely. In addition IFAW has been working to establish a group of environmentally friendly politicians in the Russian Parliament called 'GLOBE' and it is hoped that this forum will increasingly be supportive to ALTA's work. Several 'Globe' Russian MPs attended an AMUR event in January 2003.

5. IFAW delegation visits the RFE (Masha Vorontsova)

Masha Vorontsova of IFAW Russia participated in the tiger conference in Khabarovsk together with Vivek Menon (Executive Director of Wildlife Trust of India, the organisation that represents IFAW in India). They left the conference to participate in Tiger Day in Vladivostok, visiting the Sikhote Alin reserve on the way. In Vladivostok they were joined by Igor Beliatski (press officer), Sergei Ganusevich (CITES Project Manager) and Birgith Sloth (Nature Conservation and Management Specialist). They made a trip to the leopard range in SW Primorye and met with several conservationists and local authorities. IFAW has provided \$25,000 support for the Inspection Tiger CITES team and \$ 5,470 support for Tiger Day.

6. Visit to Hunchun reserve in China (Michiel Hötte)

After the conference, WCS China staff took me on a 2-day trip to the Hunchun reserve that was established in 2001 along the Russian leopard habitat. We travelled by jeep and were accompanied by a reserve staff member.

The potential for conservation in China is encouraging. Although the Hunchun reserve itself is no more than a narrow band between the border and a road that connects a string of villages, outside the reserve very large tracts of suitable forests remain. China has many "conservation advantages" over Russia. Wages are much lower, and many "Russian" problems are absent in China: fires, high density of illegal guns, complex land ownership structures and conservation responsibilities, over-hunting. We should therefore consider increasing activities in China.

The main problem in China is a "protection vacuum". There is a total ban on hunting, but it is not enforced in the vast forestry areas that are managed for logging. Establishing more reserves, such as the Hunchun reserve (where no commercial logging takes place), is at present not a feasible solution to this problem, because it meets with strong opposition from the forestry service. As a result of such opposition, the Hunchun reserve is small and includes only forests close to settlements that have been logged and have little value for further logging. Unfortunately, the disturbance factor in the reserve is high (access by humans is not limited) and deer have to compete with livestock that is allowed in many parts of the reserve.

The solution may be to stimulate the creation of a new PA regime, where commercial logging is allowed, but other forms of use are limited (e.g. live-stock grazing, NTFP harvests, and access by non-forestry/PA staff). I was told that there is at present no provision for such a regime under Chinese law. Leopards will gain more than tigers from such an approach, because forests with a lot of livestock (but few deer) probably attract mostly tigers.

I suggested to WCS China and the reserve to consider involving villagers in protection of the reserve. A possibility is to make one villager in each village (preferably a former poacher) responsible for removing snares from a designated part of the reserve. (Snares are the main poaching method and probably the main cause of low ungulate numbers). Each of these villagers will get a reward that depends on results: his reward drops if biologists that do monitoring or the reserve staff still find snares in his area. WCS China and the reserve liked this idea, and we consider trying the approach in 6 villages. Another task of the villagers can be to report sightings of leopard and tiger tracks.

I had an opportunity to talk to villagers that had lost one or two cows or horses to tigers. Besides livestock kills, I was interested in getting information from them about poaching by Chinese in Russia. I was told that villagers indeed cross the border and sometimes live on the other side up to several weeks. However, visits to Russia are considered dangerous. The villagers told me that Russian border guards shot a villager; the body was handed to Chinese authorities. One villager is known to be in a Russian prison, because he was caught more than once. But usually Chinese poachers caught in Russia are handed to Chinese authorities unharmed, and they are subsequently not punished in China. The demand from Chinese cities for NTFPs has increased sharply in the last 10 years. NTFPs



Education activities organised by WCS China in a village near the Hunchun reserve

became an important opportunity to create cash income for villagers, and as a result the local forests were stripped. Since 8 years there is very little left on the Chinese side. As a result visits to Russia have increased.

The reserve and WCS staff made a very good impression on me. WCS is developing ungulate, tiger and leopard monitoring and will train 3 Chinese students for this purpose in Russia. WCS China implemented a number of education activities, including an essay competition, a mobile exhibit and distribution of printed materials

The reserve would like to receive support for a compensation scheme. A law states that local government should compensate loss of livestock and damage to crops due to wildlife. However, the local government is relatively poor and does not provide compensations. The reserve is confident this problem will be solved within 3 years, but they would like to provide compensations in the mean time.



This picture made in January 2003 shows a large male tiger that returns to eat from a mule that was killed earlier. The picture made with a camera-trap provided by WCS is probably the first picture of a tiger in the wild in China.

The reserve documented livestock kills thoroughly. They made pictures of tiger tracks and each animal that was killed, and recorded the exact locations with GPS. There have been, 32 cases in 2 years. All cases concerned horses, mules or cows.

All kills were attributed to tigers. The average value of livestock killed was \$400. Very few families have more than 5 horses or cows and families that breed livestock seldom succeed to sell more than one animal annually. So a single livestock kill causes a very substantial loss. The reserve would like to compensate 70% of the value of livestock, which leads to estimated total costs of \$4500 per year.

7. EAZA Tiger Campaign (Naomi McClure and Sarah Christie)

The EAZA Tiger Campaign has now been running for just over a year and is enjoying great success; by the end of 2003 it will have provided full funding to more than half the supported projects and part-funding to the rest, with sufficient funds to complete the payments expected in early 2004. This level of success has meant that EAZA has decided to extend the campaign for a second year and several campaign projects have been invited to submit continuation proposals for 2004. The campaign includes three Russian projects; anti-poaching and outreach through Phoenix, mediation of human-tiger conflict through WCS Russia, and fire fighting through the Tigris Foundation.

The zoos taking part are really committed to the campaign and there are over 125 participants all over Europe and the Euro-Asian region. Additionally, ARAZPA (Australasian Regional Association of Zoos and Aquariums) zoos have joined in; during 2003 individual Australasian zoos contributed through the ARAZPA Conservation Fund, and ARAZPA has now launched their own official Tiger Campaign, making it truly an international affair. The awards scheme, introduced in order to motivate the zoos to

send in their donations quickly, has been working well. Thirty-six zoos have earned an award certificate including three "Platinum Awards" for raising over 15,000 Euro. The total raised now stands at over 280,000 Euro – well over the initial target of 250,000 Euro, and a new target for the full two years has been set at half a million Eurasia. Taking into account other zoo contributions to tiger conservation outside this co-ordinated campaign, it is probable that in 2003 the world's zoos will be supplying between 5 and 10 percent of the total global NGO budget for tiger conservation projects.

8. Breeding successes in the Amur leopard EEP (Sarah Christie and Tanya Arzhanova)

This breeding programme currently numbers 95 leopards in 40 zoos. Because there is a real possibility that leopards may be needed for reintroduction in the foreseeable future, the programme is currently focusing on increasing the numbers of healthy cubs in the European and Russian population. Breeding pairs are carefully selected in accordance with principles agreed in discussions at the Vladivostok Amur leopard meeting in 2001, to reduce inbreeding and to maximise the total retention of genetic diversity in the population, while also minimising the genetic contribution from "Founder 2" (for more detailed information on the genetics please contact Sarah.Christie@zsl.org).

We are very pleased to report that since January 2002 a total of 23 cubs have been born in this programme, of which 16 have survived. Six of the seven deaths were within a few days of birth, giving a neonatal mortality rate of 26 percent - below average for big cats in general. Two of the 16 surviving cubs have a congenital defect and another two were not a recommended litter (their parents were not genetically suitable); none of these four will be bred from in the future. Steps are being taken to identify the carriers of the damaging genes in order to eliminate them, as far as possible, from the breeding population.



Amur leopard cubs at Cricket St Thomas Zoo

We have, therefore, produced twelve healthy cubs of good genetic lines during this period; five males, five females and two of so far unknown sex. All twelve have low inbreeding coefficients, and their founder 2 levels are all below 29 percent with seven of them below 20 percent. This is an excellent result for a population which only a few years ago had virtually no genetically useful breeding pairs in a position to produce cubs. All of the young leopards will be paired with suitable mates and should begin to produce offspring themselves during 2004 or 2005, while at the same time most of their parents are continuing to breed. We can, therefore, cautiously look forward to a population expansion over the next few years, in accordance with the programme goals.

Zoos in the programme also continue to be a major source of funds for Amur leopard field conservation.

9. Tiger and Leopard Day (Sergei Bereznuik and Sharon Miller)

Building on the success of Tiger Day at Moscow Zoo in 2002 and also to add to the work already achieved by Moscow Zoo and Phoenix with their previous Tiger Days – it was decided that we should 'roll out' the idea across Europe and add in 'Amur leopards' too. Working with EAZA/EARAZA partners AMUR and Moscow Zoo instigated Tiger and Leopard Day Events in 33 zoos from Edinburgh to Novosibirsk all on 27th September to coincide with 4 events being held in the Russian Far East including a street parade in Vladivostok. Zoos were supported with printed material, posters, balloons and items to sell etc – sponsored by Land Rover. The whole day was a huge success with different zoos arranging a whole series of activities including face painting, lectures, art work, exhibitions, games, dancing etc. There was good press coverage in the different countries and particularly in Russia itself. Next year we will aim to increase the number of zoos taking part and try to add in zoos from other continents such as USA and Australia.

In Vladivostok Tiger Day has grown into a big event. IFAW provided funds to set up a huge banner and a 3 by 6 meter board on the main street of Vladivostok to advertise the event as well as funds for T-shirts and badges. The traditional parade through the city and festivities on the main square drew several thousand spectators. The mayor of Vladivostok addressed the crowd for the first time during the festival. His remark that only 7 Amur leopards remain shows we still have some education work ahead of us! Tiger Day has spread out to other cities in the RFE (Luchegorsk, Novopkrovka), although it was impossible to organise the event in these cities on the same day.



Tiger and Leopard Day parade in the main street of Vladivostok

10. Support from Alertis (Michiel Hötte)

The Dutch ALTA partner Alertis has provided three grants for conservation activities in the RFE. One grant (\$4,257) will be used to finance the “Red Wolf” team that protects the wildlife refuge “Borisovkoe Plateau” in the Amur leopard range in the RFE. Another grant (\$3,000) will be used to carry out Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) by NGOs. EIAs can play a role in campaigning and juridical procedures against development projects that harm nature, such as plans for new railway tracks, oil pipelines or mines. There is usually little time available for an EIA, so it is important that funds are available in advance. Finally, Alertis provided \$6,000 organisational support for Phoenix Fund and Tigris Foundation.

11. Visit of Charlie Knowles of WCN (Michiel Hötte and Sergei Bereznuik)

Charlie Knowles of Wildlife Conservation Network visited the RFE in August. WCN is a conservation organisation established by a small group of well-off people in California, USA. Charlie, who is one of the founders, decided to devote his life to conservation after he sold his software company a few years ago. WCN supports species conservation and has provided funds for Okapi, Ethiopian Wolf, Elephant and snow leopard projects. WCN is interested in Amur leopard conservation and Charlie already provided \$15,000 personal support through Tigris since 1999. Sergei Bereznuik, Dale Miquelle and myself introduced Charlie to the various projects (anti-poaching, fire-fighting, education, co-operation with hunting leases, habitat and population monitoring). Together with Olga Uphyrkina, the former secretary of the international Amur Leopard Steering Group, Charlie visited the project locations. Olga Uphyrkina was invited to give a presentation at the annual “Conservation Expo” where WCN presents conservation projects to the public. Olga’s presentation was well received, and a net total of \$8,570

was raised for Amur leopard conservation during the event that was held in October. We hope WCN will continue to support our work in the future.

12. Amur leopard conservation programme (Michiel Hötte)

Many documents have been written about Amur leopard conservation (e.g. the national strategy for Amur leopard conservation, various workshop documents, NGO conservation programmes). However, a solid workplan that covers all areas of Amur leopard conservation does not exist. The present documents are incomplete and often vague: responsibilities of organisations, project steps, objectives, monitoring of progress, and assumptions on which expected results are based are often not clearly defined. A good programme does not only improve the quality of the conservation work. In a simplified form, it also offers a good fundraising tool. Phoenix, WCS and Tigris are at present working on an Amur leopard programme that covers all our activities. It will be finished early 2005.

13. Illegal rifles voluntary handed in (Michiel Hötte)

Since May 2003 Phoenix/Tigris and WWF provide compensation for illegal rifles that are handed in voluntary in the leopard habitat in Southwest Primorye. A total of 26 rifles have been received by our local Inspection Tiger team. While this is an exceptionally good result, it also indicates that the number of illegal weapons is exceptionally high!

14. "Land of the Leopard" Festival (Sergei Bereznuk and Michiel Hötte)

In August the "Land of the Leopard" was organised for the first time. The festival took place on the main beach in Slavyanka, the capital of the main district in Southwest Primorye. Thousands of tourists and local citizens visit this popular beach in summer and the festival that took place on a sunny Saturday in August attracted a substantial crowd. It was a success and both the public and conservationists had a good time. A group of actors in animal costumes performed sketches on stage and organised various games and competitions in which spectators could participate. Many prizes were handed out, including framed pictures of leopards, booklets and cups with a leopard image. The festival was organised by WWF and Phoenix and financed by Tigris and WWF. Next year Phoenix will invite children and their parents from small forest settlements in the leopard habitat and provide transport for them to and from the festival.