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Background Document

Global wild tiger population status, April 2016

The 3rd **Asia Ministerial Conference on Tiger Conservation** falls close to the halfway point of Tx2 - the global goal to double wild tiger numbers by the year 2022.

To assess progress towards the Tx2 goal and guide actions to be agreed at the conference, it is important to take stock of the present status of the global tiger population in the wild. At the 2nd *Stocktaking Conference of The Global Tiger Recovery Program* in Dhaka, September 2014, tiger range countries agreed to supply a new tiger population estimation by 2016 based on full, systematic national surveys.

This has been achieved by some countries but not all. Therefore to achieve an estimate of the current global tiger population, a mixture of accurate estimations derived from national surveys and best available expert opinion has been used. This is by no means satisfactory but provides some indication of the progress towards the Tx2 goal.

The primary source of the data used was the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species account for tigers¹. However, while the IUCN Red List account was updated in 2015, the species list only includes data from 2009 up to 2014. Some countries have since added data from systematic, scientifically robust, national surveys and as such these have been included to reflect the status as of April 2016.

The table below presents the best available data up to April 2016 for each country and has been totalled to provide the latest estimation for the global wild tiger population.

Country	Total April 2016	Source
Bangladesh	106	National Survey 2015 ²
Bhutan	103	National Survey 2015 ³
Cambodia	0	IUCN 2015 ^{1, 12, 13}
China	>7	IUCN 2015 ¹
India	2226	National survey 2014 ⁴
Indonesia	371	IUCN 2015 ¹ (lower range)
Lao PDR	2	IUCN 2015 ¹
Malaysia	250	IUCN 2015 ^{1, 10, 11} (lower range)
Myanmar	No current data available*	IUCN 2015 ¹
Nepal	198	National Survey 2013 ⁵
Russia	433	National survey 2015 ⁶
Thailand	189	IUCN 2015 ¹ (lower range)
Vietnam	<5	IUCN 2015 ¹
Global Total	3890	

*The Myanmar Government figure is 85 tigers from a 2010 estimate, however as there is no recent survey data available this figure has not been included.

Global trend

The global estimation is now close to 3,900 tigers in the wild. This is an increase from the 2010 figure, which estimated the population to be as few as 3,200 tigers. This increase has come primarily from India, Russia, Nepal and Bhutan. The increase is likely to be due to new areas being included in the national surveys, improved survey techniques as well as growth in the population from conservation efforts. One country, Bangladesh, has noted a severe decline in their national estimate (from 440 tigers in 2010⁷ to 106 in 2015²). This is considered to be due to an over-estimation of the population in 2010 and not necessarily due to a real decline in the population. It is impossible to say which direction the actual change in Bangladesh's tiger population has been in the last six years.

Systematic, national scale surveys have not been undertaken in China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand; therefore their contribution to the global figure is based on coarse estimations.

Bearing in mind the scale of the estimation and the vague basis for the estimations that led to the "as few as 3,200" figure from 2010, it does not make sense to compare national figures between 2010 and 2016 for most countries.

The global increase in estimations, recognising the frailties in the data, would be the first time such a trend has been reported. Therefore, while there is still a long way to go to reach 6,000 tigers by 2022, it does provide a glimmer of hope that conservation efforts are beginning to have a positive impact towards recovery. If these efforts were applied equally across the tiger range countries as a matter of urgency then the Tx2 goal could still be achieved. However, this still depends almost entirely on the willingness of the tiger range governments, particularly those with potentially declining populations concentrated in Southeast Asia.

National trends and data explanations

Bangladesh

The first systematic national survey was conducted in 2015. All previous national estimations came from coarse estimations based on limited data. Previous population figures appear to have been over-estimated. The apparent decline from 440 tigers in 2010⁷ to 106 in 2015² can probably be attributed to readjustment following more systematic, accurate surveys and not necessarily due to a real decline in the population. It is therefore not possible to say which direction the actual change in the population in the last six years has been in Bangladesh.

Bhutan

The first full systematic national survey was completed in Bhutan in 2015³. This survey estimated the mean population to be 103 tigers (Range 89-124). This is a small increase from the previous government estimations (75 tigers⁷) and therefore there may have been an increase in the actual population.

Cambodia

No evidence of tigers have been recorded in Cambodia since 2007^{8,9}. Therefore, it is likely that there are no breeding populations of tigers in Cambodia. Recovery of the tiger population in Cambodia will require reintroduction of individuals from outside of the country. Reintroduction is only feasible if there is the strongest political will for success.

China

No national surveys have been conducted. There are plans to undertake targeted surveys in Northeast China (the only region with recent evidence of tigers) in 2016. The present estimate is therefore based on the latest IUCN 2015¹ estimation. This states the present population greater than 7 individuals. Government estimates place the total higher (close to 20 individuals). The more precise estimate will require targeted surveys of sites with evidence of tigers.

India

In 2014, India undertook its largest, most intensive and systematic national tiger population survey. The survey included new areas and more intensive sampling. The survey estimated the population to range between 1,945 to 2,491 with a mean estimate of 2,226 tigers⁴. This represents an increase from the last survey in 2010 which estimated a mean of 1,706 tigers⁸. 1,686 individual tigers were recorded by the camera traps, marking an absolute minimum figure.

Indonesia

No systematic national survey has been undertaken with sufficient accuracy to provide an estimate of the population in Sumatra (the only island in Indonesia supporting tigers following the extinctions on Bali and Java in the early 20th century). Full island occupancy surveys have been undertaken and numerous site level surveys are ongoing so there is some data to provide broad estimations. Without the full national estimate, the IUCN estimation is based on the best knowledge available. The IUCN estimates the population to be between 371 to 1,273 tigers¹. To be cautious, we have used the lower range figure of 371.

Lao PDR

There is now evidence of tigers from only one site in Lao PDR (Nam Et-Pho Louey)⁹. This population is understood to be two remaining individuals^{1,9} based on systematic surveys that have been ongoing for many years. The last estimation for this site in 2010 stated the population at 17 individuals⁷ (9-23 range), so this site has clearly suffered a sharp decline. Recovery in Lao PDR will require reintroduction of individuals from outside of the country.

Malaysia

There has been no national systematic survey and therefore the population estimate has been drawn from the IUCN estimate. The IUCN figures are based on the present government estimation, backed by the major NGOs involved in tiger population monitoring. This states the population as being between 250 to 340 tigers^{1,10,11}. This range is based on very limited survey work and large gaps in the knowledge of tiger occupancy across Peninsular Malaysia. Taking the cautious approach, we have included the lower range figure for the global population estimation.

Myanmar

There has been no recent national systematic survey. Knowledge of tiger distribution in Myanmar is relatively high but population estimates are still limited. The IUCN Red List species account does not give a population figure for Myanmar. Whilst WWF does not believe systematic nation-wide surveys are required in the country, recent camera-trapping from a number of locations has confirmed tiger presence in both the north and east of Myanmar. A minimum population of at least 20 individuals is likely. Targeted site surveys will provide a rapid understanding of the present tiger population. However until then we have to use the IUCN estimation¹.

Nepal

A full national survey was undertaken in Nepal in 2013. This survey recorded 198 (163 - 235) tigers in the wild⁵. This was reported as an increase of 63% from the previous survey in 2009.

Russia

The latest national tiger census concluded in 2015. This survey estimated the population to range between 425 to 440 adult tigers⁶ with an average of 433. This is a slight increase from the last survey in 2005, which placed the population between 330 to 390 tigers⁶ with an average at 360.

Thailand

There has been no systematic national survey and therefore the national estimate is based on the IUCN estimate¹ which ranges from 189 to 252 tigers. We have taken the lower range to be cautious, and therefore placed the contribution from Thailand at 189. Most of Thailand has been systematically surveyed and an accurate national estimation could be achieved through consultation without extensive surveys.

Vietnam

No evidence of tigers have been recorded in Vietnam since at least 2009¹². No national surveys have been undertaken. Therefore the IUCN 2015 estimation¹ has been used. This estimate places the population at less than five individuals.

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