Science

Sumatran tiger extinction risk worse than thought as palm oil deforestation marches on

ABC Science  By environment reporter Nick Kilvert
Updated about an hour ago
First posted about 6 hours ago

There are now believed to be only two viable populations of Sumatran tigers in the wild after a year-long survey found the tigers' habitat is still being cleared for industries like palm oil.

Scientists estimate that the number of critically endangered tigers remaining is down to 618 as of 2012, a reduction of more than 16 per cent on estimates since 2000.

But critically, they say in a paper published in Nature Communications today, land clearing has fragmented many of those tigers into small, isolated groups that will not be able to survive long term.

Key points:
- Only two populations big enough to survive long term
- Tiger density increased in protected areas but decreased overall
With only two of the groups containing more than 30 breeding females, the risk of extinction of the Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) is greater than ever, said the study's lead author Matthew Luskin.

"There are two forests that are still large enough to independently sustain tigers over the long and medium terms," said Dr Luskin, who conducted the research as part of his PhD at the University of California, Berkeley.

The researchers studied the tigers across a range of lowland, montane and logged habitat using hundreds of remote cameras triggered by movement.

Individual tigers were able to be identified by their unique stripe pattern which enabled the researchers to avoid duplication.

**Corruption, palm oil trade paves way for wildlife poachers**

Although habitat fragmentation caused by roads is one threat to tigers, the access the roads provide can spark a further cascade of pressures, according to Mason Campbell, a tropical ecologist at James Cook University.

"Indonesia is investing heavily in putting in big [roads] through the major islands," Dr Campbell said.
"In behind them is often the selective loggers and the illegal loggers who go in and steal some of the high-value timber."

According to Dr Campbell, the conservation status of forests can be downgraded after they have been logged, giving industry a foothold to begin development.

"It's bigger, larger, richer companies coming in, and they're often — I'm trying to put this politely — intricately linked with the local government officials who've approved those roads," he said.

"Once it's a production area it's a bit of a free-for-all for palm oil companies."

**Hope in untouched areas**

Although the researchers found an overall decline in Sumatran tiger numbers, they were encouraged to find that tiger population density had increased in areas that remained untouched.

"The results are a mixed bag for tigers," Dr Luskin said.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) publishes a yearly updated scorecard that rates companies' use of palm oil.

Whilst some retailers like Coles and Woolworths scored highly in 2017, a number of big brand names refused to share their data.
Exploitation of animal habitat for Palm Oil production is one of the topics that are addressed by Primary Ethics teachers in primary schools in NSW. Kids are made aware that it is possible to discriminate against products containing palm oil, in the supermarket with Mum or Dad or by downloading an app that makes it easy to identify the offending products. Hip pocket action is the only answer - reduce or eliminate demand and the market will act accordingly. But, as indicated in this article, high level corruption, in the form of granting of large forested concessions to wealthy or politically-connected businessmen will take a lot of time and pressure to stamp out - especially in Malaysia and Indonesia.