



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

PROTECTING TIGERS WITH PROJECT PREDATOR



INDIA: Bengal tiger in the wild. Photo © Bhiswajit Roy Chowdhury, courtesy of INTERPOL

A Ticking Clock for Tigers

Tigers are facing extinction. A century ago, there may have been more than 100,000 tigers throughout Asia. Today, there may be as few as 3,500 tigers remaining in the wild today. The greatest current threat to Asian big cat survival is organized criminal groups who control the burgeoning and highly lucrative illicit trade. These highly coordinated and armed operations cross international boundaries, control strong supply chains, and connect the source, transit, and destination countries for illegal wildlife products. Because of this sophisticated system, it is impossible for any one country to tackle the crime alone.

To ensure a future for tigers and other Asian big cats, USAID began supporting INTERPOL's Project Predator in 2011 to dismantle criminal networks trafficking in

illegal tiger products, joining the World Bank, the United Kingdom's Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare in support of the Global Tiger Initiative. In most wildlife crime cases, law enforcement officials apprehend low level poachers. However, it is only by prosecuting the principals controlling the illegal wildlife product supply chain that these criminal networks can be dismantled. Project Predator improves the capacity of police and other authorities to identify, investigate, and locate key wildlife criminals. INTERPOL provides policing expertise, but not police, to fight terrorism, cybercrime, and organized and emerging crime, by training law enforcement officers, analyzing supply chains, and facilitating transnational operations conducted by 190 member countries.

Training for Results

While law enforcement staff may be quite familiar with procedures for investigating crimes involving theft, violence, and drugs, they may not have any experience with wildlife crime. INTERPOL's Project Predator has trained officers in tiger and snow leopard areas on standard techniques in enforcement, crime scene investigation for poaching incidents, and intelligence gathering. In addition, Project Predator works to link information systems from rangers and police to prosecutors and judiciary to ensure connectivity from investigation to arrest to prosecution to sentencing. These trainings have resulted in the establishment of a strong transboundary network of enforcement officers across the tiger and snow leopard range areas.

In FY 2015, Project Predator trainees organized Operation PAWS (Protection of Asian Wildlife Species) to target wildlife crime and criminals across Asia through multi-agency collaboration and systematic intelligence exchange and analysis. PAWS involved 13 tiger range countries and led to the arrest of more than 120 wildlife criminals, in addition to revealing the location of 25 wildlife crime fugitives. Through PAWS, officers seized 26 tiger skins and parts, 50 common and clouded leopards, 12 big cat skins, 83 bears and parts, more than 13 tons of ivory, 37 rhino horns, 2,000 turtles and reptiles, 282 pangolins, 5 tons of pangolin meat, and more than 600 pounds of pangolin scales.

Due to this focus on training officials in law enforcement, sharing intelligence, and coordination in operations, the rate of tiger seizures increased, showing that these efforts better enable officials to do their jobs effectively. In fact, a recent study by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC analyzing the number of tiger seizures from 2000 to 2015 found that nearly half of all seizures in that period occurred from 2012 to 2015, a period in which Project Predator ramped up trainings and information exchange on tiger crime.

International Cooperation

Countries often work in silos when investigating criminals and networks, not knowing that another country has intelligence and evidence that could help identify, apprehend, or sentence criminals. USAID assistance allowed INTERPOL to facilitate a joint investigative support meeting with India and Nepal that

allowed these countries to clearly map out different networks facilitating the tiger trade between India and Nepal and identify the priority targets that need to be arrested to dismantle these networks.

One of the people of interest identified was Raj Kumar Praja, a Nepalese national wanted for poaching of 19 rhinos in Nepal. In November 2013, Nepal requested that INTERPOL issue a "red notice" calling for his arrest. Immigration checks revealed that Praja had entered Malaysia with a valid work permit and later acquired a new passport with a different name. Under Project Predator, INTERPOL coordinated information exchange between Nepal and Malaysia for more than a year, until Praja was located and arrested by Malaysian authorities in January 2015. He was deported back to Nepal and is currently serving a 15-year sentence for wildlife poaching.

A Future for Tigers

Conservation and habitat management are not enough to assure a future for wildlife threatened by demand for illegal wildlife products. A strong professional law enforcement response, with a clear focus on investigation of criminals and networks, is essential to ensuring the survival of endangered Asian wildlife species. INTERPOL's Project Predator, with the support of USAID, will continue to prioritize and facilitate efforts to dismantle transnational criminals and networks operating in Asia.



SINGAPORE, 2015: Rhino horns and tiger claws confiscated by authorities participating in Operation PAWS II, organized with assistance from Project Predator. Photo © AVA, Singapore, courtesy of INTERPOL