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By Kathy Lally
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MOSCOW- The tale of the magnificent Siberian tiger, and its unfinished fight for survival, should be a compelling one for the 500 conservationists and world leaders arriving for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's tiger summit this weekend.

The summit on the fate of the tiger has been convened in St. Petersburg as the singular chance to keep the world's last 3,000 or so wild tigers from extinction, and the near-death experience of [Russia's](#) big, beautiful animals informs how they can be saved elsewhere.



"Russia was the first country to almost lose its tigers," said Dale Miquelle, director of the Russia program for the Wildlife Conservation Society, "and the first to bring them back. There's a long history of lessons in Russia."

Miquelle, who has been working in the Russian Far East since 1992, will attend the summit, and if asked, he knows what he would tell the dignitaries.

"Tigers need three things," he said Friday, from Vladivostok. "They need space. They need their habitat and prey protected - deer and wild boar. And they need laws against poaching vigorously enforced. It's a very simple formula. It's very doable."

Everyone seems to agree tigers - which numbered 100,000 worldwide a century ago - won't go on living unless people behave differently. But the world has never found it easy to agree on what to do about anything, and so it is with the tiger, which has inspired the imagination of humans everywhere, who see strength, fierceness and passion in the graceful cat.

In 2008, World Bank President Robert B. Zoellick organized the Global Tiger Initiative, targeting the summit in 2010 - the Chinese Year of the Tiger - as the time tiger countries would figure out a plan, now aimed at doubling the number of cats in the wild by

Focusing efforts

To help protect the world's remaining 3,000 or so wild tigers, the Wildlife Conservation Society has suggested narrowing conservation efforts to 42 sites where nearly 70 percent of the wild cats live.

-  Historic range of wild tigers
-  42 key sites for protection



SOURCE: Wildlife Conservation Society
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2022, the next Year of the Tiger.

Each of the 13 tiger range countries is arriving with its own plans, and the summit - from Sunday through Wednesday - is meant to consolidate them, set a common agenda, attract financing and mobilize the political and popular will to carry them out. The United States, a major donor to tiger conservation, will be there.

So far, there's been polite disagreement about how far-reaching the plans should be, with much sentiment to go big and broad - engaging and educating communities, vastly expanding protected landscapes and restoring tigers to a much wider range than they now inhabit. Others argue that the situation is so dire that time and money should be concentrated on relatively few areas before declaring loftier ambitions.

"We want to see tigers living in large, healthy landscapes," said Barney Long, WWF tiger program manager, "not in small parks where they are vulnerable to outbreaks of poaching."

The Wildlife Conservation Society and Panthera, a conservation organization dedicated to wild cats, have proposed narrowing efforts, and WCS has suggested 42 sites where tigers should be protected.

Joe Walston, director of WCS-Asia, says that with 70 percent of the world's tigers fairly concentrated - including 18 "source sites" in [India](#), eight in Malaysia and six in Russia - money should be aimed at monitoring and strengthening law enforcement to stop poaching in such areas.

Broader attempts are too risky, warns Luke Hunter, Panthera's executive vice president. "If you start talking about infrastructure and saying a dam can't be built unless it doesn't harm tigers, that's all good," he said. "The problem is we don't have time for it. Educating communities is a good thing, but by the time the children have grown up, the tigers will be gone."

Zoellick contends that those points of view are less contradictory than they appear. "We all agree that if you don't preserve the core population, there's nothing to talk about," he said, but at the same time those populations need room to roam.

Somehow, the WWF says, everyone will agree, because they must if there's any hope of saving the tiger. "The impediment will be financing," said Mike Baltzer, head of WWF's Tigers Alive initiative. "We're hoping donors will step up."

Strong anti-poaching laws and financing strict enforcement will be on Russia's agenda as it hosts the summit. Russia has watched tigers decline or prosper as laws and police weakened or grew powerful.

Its Siberian tiger - the Amur tiger - once roamed the forests and mountains of the Russian Far East by the hundreds. But hunting and trade destroyed them, and by 1940, when Lev Kaplanov, the director of a Russian nature preserve, did the first scientific count, he found only 20 to 30.

By 1948, the Soviet government had outlawed tiger hunting and there was little means or reason to violate the law. Guns were strictly controlled, the border with [China](#) was very much closed, preventing trafficking, and the sale of tiger parts was prohibited. By the late 1980s, perhaps 400 were on the prowl.

"There was no incentive to poach," Miquelle said, "and it largely ended."

As the Soviet Union slowly crumbled into chaos, however, those controls disappeared, replaced by a poverty that encouraged hunting and a ready market in nearby China, where tiger parts are valued

for folk medicine. Now 20 to 30 tigers are poached in Russia every year, and Miquelle fears for the future of the 500 Siberians thought to be left. Few die of old age.

Just Monday, anti-poaching police in the Russian Far East stopped a truck in the Khasan region near the border with China and [North Korea](#). They found a tiger carcass inside and arrested four people on poaching charges.

Miquelle mourned the dead tiger but rejoiced in the arrests.

"If we can't protect the tiger, we can't protect the natural resources we rely on," he said. "If we can save the big cats, we can save ourselves."