



Facts About the Tiger

🐾 2010 is the Chinese Year of the Tiger. It has also been declared the Year of the Tiger by the international conservation community. Vladimir Putin recently announced that Russia will be holding an international conference on tiger protection in Vladivostok in the fall of this year. At an international “tiger workshop” in Kathmandu in fall 2009, China, for the first time ever, actively solicited advice on tiger conservation and habitat restoration (a milestone).

- 🐾 The Siberian (or Amur) tiger spends much of its life in the snow, and of the six surviving subspecies of tiger is the only one habituated to arctic conditions. It is considered to be the largest cat in the world.
- 🐾 Much has been made of the Siberian tiger’s massive size — larger-than-life lengths of up to 16 feet and weights of up to 900 pounds have been quoted in reputable publications. But anyone who has been close to an Amur tiger will tell you that these creatures need no embellishment. The thickly maned head can be as broad as a man’s chest and shoulders, and winter paw prints are described using hats and pot lids for comparison.
- 🐾 Man-eating in Siberian tigers is extremely rare and is almost always the result of a crippling injury, starvation, or as revenge for an attack by a human.
- 🐾 The principle threats to all tigers are poaching and habitat loss (from logging and the reduction of the huge spaces it needs to exist), which also depletes available prey. This has brought the intense conflict between humans and animals to the fore.
- 🐾 That increased dramatically in 1989 when the border with China reopened at the same time that Russia’s nationalized logging industry collapsed with the coming of perestroika. This drove desperately poor loggers, trappers and deserters into the forests, forced to subsist on poaching game in a way that was disastrous for the region’s big tigers. The situation turned deadly when Chinese smugglers arrived.
- 🐾 The Asian market for tiger-based “medicinal” products is the leading cause of tiger deaths, and their bones, organs and skins can command five figures on the black market.
- 🐾 With financial assistance (and pressure) from international conservation agencies, the territorial government created “Inspection Tiger” in the hope of restoring law and order to the forests. Armed with guns, cameras and broad police powers, these teams were charged with intercepting poachers and resolving a steadily increasing number of conflicts between tigers and human beings.
- 🐾 In many ways, Inspection Tiger’s mandate resembles that of detectives on a narcotics detail, and so does the risk: the money is big, and the players are often desperate and dangerous. Tigers are similar to drugs in that they are sold by the gram and the kilo, and their value increases according to the refinement of both product and seller.
- 🐾 Between 1992–94, poachers killed roughly one quarter of Russia’s wild population. Today, only between 300 and 400 Siberian tigers remain in Russia’s Far East. The tiger is currently classified as critically endangered with only about 3,000 animals remaining in the wild across all of Asia.
- 🐾 Nestled in the remotest corner of Russia’s Far East, not far from the Chinese border, Primorye, the region for which Yuri Trush’s Inspection Tiger unit is responsible, is the last stronghold of the Siberian tiger.