Bringing Back the Big Cats: Potential Restoration of Tigers and Leopards in Korean Peninsula, a Former Range of the Species in Asia

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In Korea, the relationship between humans and large cats, tigers and leopards, was relatively peaceful during most of last 5000 years. Although large cats were occasionally hunted for retaliation of human attack or simply for their high value, human and large cats maintained fear for each other, and respected each others’ territories. During this time, Koreans did not attempt to exterminate the large cats from Korean peninsula. This delicate balance between large cats and human started to break down with the establishment of the Chosun dynasty, about 500 years ago. The nation developed systematic policies, such as organizing special military personnel to hunt tigers and leopards. This was the beginning of the end for large cats. Continuous hunting policies kept the tiger and leopard populations low in until late in the Chosun dynasty. It was during the Japanese colonial era (1910-1945) that the population of large cats finally declined to near extermination on the Korean peninsula.

Is the restoration of large cats in Korean peninsula possible in the future? We think there is hope if we act now. Three issues related to potential restoration of large cats in Korea will be discussed: 1) Why is it necessary to restore big cats in Korea? This issue requires involvement of specialists from various aspects including humanities, sociology and ecology. 2) Public sentiments toward big cats and their restoration in South Korea and the potential human-large cat conflicts. 3) Suitability of potential habitats for tigers and leopards in Korea.

Trans-Border Movements of Large Carnivores in the Far East of Russia

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Technical constructions on borders may be considered as a barrier for the large carnivores. We collared 5 wild Amur tigers, 2 brown and 2 Asiatic bears with GPS-collars in 2010-11 at the border region to study spatial movements. Data allowed to find out that one female Amur tiger and one male brown bear had crossed Russian-Chinese border. The tiger spent almost all time at the Russia, crossing the border 5 times during 8 months, staying at the China no longer than one day. The bear also spent most of the time in Russia, crossing the border 11 times during 8 months, staying in China from several hours to 11 days. In spring 2014 five 2-year-old orphan tiger cubs (3 males, 2 females) with GPS-collars were released in the wild. Two males crossed Russian-Chinese border. One male swam across Amur River in October. He stayed in China for 63 days until he crossed the river back over the ice. In China he used space of 15010 km². Two hours after the return he again crossed the river over the ice, but stayed in China only 22 hours. The other male also crossed Russian-Chinese border by water. 11 November he rounded border constructions on Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island by Amur River. He stayed in China for 33 days and used space of 1229 km². He returned in Russia rounding border constructions on the island, but by Ussuri River. The obtained data give valuable information about existence of the trans-border populations of large carnivores.