

Saving our disappearing tigers

Most people think tigers are everywhere and who can blame them. Whether you are a young Cub Scout earning your tiger badge, a fan of the Boynton Beach Community High School Tigers, or you just love the character Tigger, tigers are ingrained in us.

Unfortunately, as common as tigers are in our lexicon, they are rapidly disappearing from our planet. Scientists and wildlife experts believe that tigers, with fewer than 3,000 left in the wild, could be extinct within a generation.

What can we do? The Palm Beach Zoo has chosen to be a partner in the international effort to save the tiger. We are approaching this effort on two fronts. Palm Beach Zoo has formed an alliance with Panthera, one of the most important big cat conservation organizations in the world, to help increase awareness of the tiger crisis and to support programs to monitor and learn more about wild tigers.

In addition, the Palm Beach Zoo is part of the Species Survival Program of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The goal of this program is to use the best science to bring together healthy males and females of endangered species so that qualified zoos have the best chance of raising and caring for newborns.

Palm Beach Zoo is taking on the challenge of breeding and raising Malayan tigers. The Malayan government believes there are fewer than 300 of these magnificent cats left in the wild. They have been slaughtered by poachers and devastated by loss of natural habitat. The Malayan government, working with Panthera, is fighting to save the tiger.

Palm Beach Zoo is doing its part here at home. We recently witnessed the successful breeding of our two Malayan tiger adults – Berapi and Rimba. The result was three healthy, energetic male cubs that have excited zoo visitors.

Their birth also gives us the opportunity to inform people about the threats these amazing cats face in the wild. The more we can inform people about the need to protect tigers and to enhance their dwindling population, the better chance we have of success.

With the growth of our tiger population, Palm Beach Zoo has embarked on an ambitious project to increase the wildlife habitat and educational programs with a new, innovative Tiger Valley exhibit. Our Malayan tiger population will enjoy three times the space of our current exhibit with complex, natural features including river-like water systems and three contiguous habitats for our tigers to roam and play. The night facilities will be expanded to accommodate as many as ten tigers.

We expect the first phase of the new exhibit to cost \$3 million and we are proud that in just a matter of months we have already raised \$1 million. With ongoing fundraising success we could open the first phase of the exhibit as early as Spring 2013. Phase Two will focus on tiger education buildings that will provide programs that teach about ongoing efforts to save the Malayan tiger.

Raising newborn tiger cubs is a challenging and rewarding experience. Our goal at the Palm Beach Zoo is to maintain these tigers in as natural a state as possible. These animals thrive best when allowed to maintain their natural wild instincts. Treating tiger cubs as pets is wrong for the animal and wrong for our human understanding of this endangered cat.

We hope that zoo visitors are getting a deeper understanding of dangers these tigers confront and we're proud that the Palm Beach Zoo is at the forefront of helping to ensure the survival of the Malayan tiger.

Terry L. Maple, Ph.D.
President/CEO