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## How S'poreans can help save the Malayan tiger

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Only about 250 to 340 Malayan tigers are left in the wild. Photo: Loretta Ann Shepherd/MYCAT

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SINGAPORE — By watching what they consume and serving as “boots on the ground” near the western border of Taman Negara National Park in Pahang, Singaporeans can help to protect the wild tiger population in Peninsular Malaysia, say conservationists.

Latest findings announced this week by a tiger conservation alliance and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) Peninsular Malaysia have suggested that 250 to 340 wild Malayan tigers are left — smaller than the previous estimate of 500. This means the target of 1,000 wild Malayan tigers in Malaysia by 2020 may now be unachievable, said Perhilitan and the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (MYCAT).

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To play a part in conservation, Singaporeans can head to Malaysia as “volunteer tourists” on weekends to enjoy nature, and protect tiger and other wildlife from deadly snares and illegal logging at the same time, said tiger biologist Kae Kawanishi, MYCAT’s general manager.

One MYCAT project allows volunteers to take part in low-impact activities such as hiking and photography, while deterring poachers with their mere presence. Started in 2010, the CAT Walks — CAT is the acronym for Citizen Action for Tigers — take place in a critical tiger corridor near the western border of Taman Negara National Park in Pahang, which links to another major tiger landscape to the west, called the Main Range.

Dr Vilma D’Rozario, co-founder of local green group Cicada Tree Eco-Place, has been on a CAT Walk and hopes to encourage more Singaporeans to participate. Sixty per cent of the proceeds from a fund-raising dinner organised by the group next Saturday will partially subsidise Singapore volunteers for CAT Walks in the year ahead. The rest will go to MYCAT, Singapore’s Animal Concerns Research and Education Society and biodiversity-related research grants, said Dr D’Rozario.

There are other ways in which Singaporeans can make a difference: By not consuming tiger meat or tiger parts, and not crossing the Causeway to eat meat from wild pigs, Sambar deer and barking deer, which are tiger prey, she said.

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Malayan tigers are found only in Peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand, but the numbers remaining in southern Thailand are insignificant, said Dr Kawanishi. Poaching, as well as loss and fragmentation of forests, are the key threats to tigers in the country. Forest fragmentation due to the building of roads, for instance, damages a landscape and helps poachers penetrate internal forests quickly, she said.

About 50 per cent of three priority areas for tigers in Malaysia — Belum Temengor, Taman Negara and Endau Rompin — are designated protected areas, but foot patrols are needed to truly protect the tigers, she added.

“For example, my research found that western Taman Negara lost 85 per cent of its (tiger) population in 11 years because of a lack of active protection,” said Dr Kawanishi, who is from Japan and did her doctorate in wildlife ecology and conservation in the United States.

Estimates of tiger numbers in each of the three areas cannot be revealed yet, as they are part of an academic paper being drafted, she said.

More sites need to be surveyed for a more robust tiger population estimate for Malaysia, said Perhilitan and MYCAT. But with the latest estimates, Dr Kawanishi recently submitted a detailed proposal to the International Union for Conservation of Nature to reclassify the Malayan tiger as a critically endangered species.

It has been listed as an endangered species since 2008. A reclassification would signal that the Malayan tiger needs immediate conservation interventions and more focused resources, or it will face extinction sooner than species with the endangered status, she said.

MYCAT, which consists of the Malaysian Nature Society, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Programme and WWF-Malaysia, is also calling for the Malaysian government to establish a task force to save the tiger from imminent extinction, said Dr Kawanishi.

To find out more about the fundraising dinner on Sept 27, visit <http://tinyurl.com/save-malayan-tigers>. A free talk on protecting the Malayan tiger will be conducted by MYCAT’s Mr Ashleigh Seow at 4pm on Sept 26 at the function hall of the Singapore Botanic Gardens’ Botany Centre.

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