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Dutch Businessman Traces Footsteps of Amur Tigers

By Lena Smirnova

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An amur tiger.

The tiger is the undisputed poster-boy of the animal kingdom.

In terms of glitzy publicity and glamourous acquaintances — including President Vladimir Putin, movie star Leonardo DiCaprio and supermodel Naomi Campbell — the striped predator has no rivals. But now a humble businessman has made it his mission to save the species that he says is still at risk of extinction despite the enviable star support.

Dutch national Chris Slappendel is traveling 100,000 kilometers through 31 countries in which tigers live or have lived to raise awareness about the endangered species. One of his goals is to have the issue included on the agenda of the next G20 Summit, which will take place in St. Petersburg in September.

"My skills are marketing, sales and management," Slappendel wrote while in transit

from China to Laos. "I realized while preparing my TigerTrail that the awareness issue wasn't addressed properly. Not by governments, not by NGOs and also not by the Global Tiger Initiative Summit held in St. Petersburg in 2010."

Slappendel began his six-month journey on May 15 at the Caspian Sea — former home to the now extinct Caspian tiger — before moving onward to the Russian Far East to see the Amur tiger, which, despite huge population depletion, has clung to survival.

What struck him was how empty the Russian forests seemed. Forest fires and illegal logging have wrecked the Amur tiger's natural habitats while poachers continue to hunt those animals that remain, Slappendel explained.

A lack of monitoring mechanisms is hindering conservation efforts, he added. The number of hunters exceeds the number of gamekeepers by at least 100 times, and those gamekeepers that do work in the area lack the skills and equipment to do their jobs effectively.

Corruption is another issue.

"There are strong indications that some policemen work together with poachers trading drugs and weapons," Slappendel wrote, referring to his conversations with local biologists and nature reserve directors. "People within wildlife conservation, even on the management level, may be integrated [into the illegal industry]."

The lack of stable Internet access in some areas of Russia makes it hard for state-employed gamekeepers to track illegal hunters and raise public awareness about the situation, he added.

Despite the problems, Slappendel described Russia as a global leader in tiger conservation efforts.

Russia currently has about 450 tigers, 95 percent of which live in the Far East and together make up the world's largest non-fragmented tiger population, according to the World Wildlife Fund. The Global Tiger Initiative estimates that there are 360 living adult tigers in the country.

The federal government set up a noncommercial foundation for the study and protection of the Amur tiger on July 29, following up on the responsibilities that Russia assumed after hosting the first International Tiger Summit in St. Petersburg in 2010.

The summit set a goal for the 13 countries where wild tigers still live to double the animals' population by 2022. Russia was given an exemption to this rule — in order not to disrupt the balance of its ecosystem, the country should work toward a maximum of 700 tigers at a time, said Vladimir Krever, head of the biodiversity program at the Russian branch of the World Wildlife Fund.

In pursuit of this, the government is expanding protections for the species.

As of July, hunters face criminal charges in addition to large fines if they seek out the animals included in the country's Red Book list of endangered species, which includes Amur tigers.

The Environment Ministry also increased the monetary value it assigns to different animals

to calculate the losses from illegal hunting. The material cost assigned by this measure to the loss of one tiger rose from 500,000 rubles ($15,000) to 1.1 million rubles in March.

Ecologists and fellow politicians, including former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have said Putin's personal interest in tigers was a key factor in getting these reforms through.

Putin is the owner of a tigress that was given to him as a gift and now lives in a Caucasian zoo. In 2008, he traveled to a nature reserve to put an electronic collar on another tigress so that scientists could track her movements. Krever could not comment on the fate of the tiger, but said

the president's actions have helped draw attention to conservation issues.

"The involvement of the president or prime minister is always important and plays a key role in the success of a project," Krever said. "[Putin] set the tone."

And tigers seem set to get another boost from the president.

The foundation to protect the Amur tiger will use non-budget funds transferred through the Russian Geographical Society, where Putin serves as a chairman of the trustees board. The foundation will be headed by his aide Konstantin Chuichenko.

A similar high-level initiative, this time to protect leopards, was set up in 2011 and is led by the head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov. This foundation has already managed to increase the leopard population in the Caucasus and the Far East by 50 percent, and environmentalists said they hope that the new tiger foundation would be equally effective.

Krever estimated that 40 to 50 tigers were lost each year during the three-year gap between the time that the foundation was established and the pledges made at St. Petersburg's Tiger Summit, but is optimistic about the new initiative.

"Time has not been wasted. Better late than never," Krever said.

The tiger issue will be covered at the G20 summit in one way or another, he added.

Slappendel sent his proposal to the U.S., Chinese, Russian, Indian and Indonesian G20 delegations over a week ago but has not received any replies yet. For now he is continuing to lead what he calls a "guerilla campaign" with a small team, no budget and some help from social media.

"We realize that time is short," Slappendel said of the decision to appeal to the delegations, "and that the chances that these campaigns will have any success before the G20 starts are slim, but nevertheless we decided to go for it."

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