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Nature, Not Hunger, Drove Putin's Amur Tiger to Ditch Russia for China

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The Amur tiger, released into the wild by President Vladimir Putin in May, did not cross the border into China out of hunger.

A giant cat with links to President Vladimir Putin ditched Russia for China not out of hunger, but because of its restless nature, a tiger expert said Thursday.

Kuzya the tiger, released into the wild by Putin in May, swam across the mighty far-eastern Amur River and into China last weekend, data from his tracking collar shows.

Early explanations put the migration down to being spurred by the tiger's search for prey, but a regional hunting official has cast doubt upon that version.

"He ate well. We checked," Valery Pogasiyenko, who heads the Amur region's hunting department, told the Interfax news agency.

"He's a stray cat by nature," Pogasiyenko said by way of an alternative explanation of Kuzya's

travels.

Though the official did not specify what a tiger's nature involves, some Russian media interpreted him as saying it was a desire for sex that drove Kuzya to wet his fur in the hope of finding a mate on the Chinese side.

Chinese officials, who said the tiger has been tracked to China's Taipinggou nature reserve, have expressed a readiness to "release cattle" in the wild to feed him if he is, indeed, lacking nutrition, state news agency Xinhua reported.

No mention was made of a potential mate for the tiger, however.

Tigers are weary of water, and Kuzya's braving of the 700-meter-wide Amur River has prompted much astonishment.

Some media have speculated the endangered feline might have been killed by poachers — a perpetual danger to Amur tigers — who simply ditched his collar into the river.

But that seems unlikely because the tracking collar will stop transmitting a signal once the tagged animal is dead, local news site Ampravda.ru said Thursday.

Kuzya was part of a five-cub litter found orphaned in the far-eastern taiga last year. The cubs were nursed to health and released into the wild with the blessing of Putin, a noted animal lover.

Amur tigers, one of the biggest predators on the planet, are an endangered tiger subspecies, with about 400 remaining in the wild, according to available estimates.

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