KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

SURAT KHABAR	:	STALIFESTYLE			
TARIKH	:	08.02.22	MUKA SURAT	:	2
JABATAN	:	PERHILITAN			

Breeding hope for *Panthera tigris jacksoni*

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Taking centrestage

When the NWRC was first set up in 2013, it only had five blocks housing 20 tigers relocated from the Malacca Zoo; today, it holds some 400 animals from 36 different species.

"The centre has three objectives: rescue, rehabilitation and release," explains its head, Dr David Magintan, adding that there are currently nine male tigers and 13 females at the centre.

They are a motley bunch of captive-born, wild-caught and even seized from poachers or those keeping the animals illegally without a Perhilitan permit. Sadly, not all the tigers are suitable for breeding as some are either too old or juvenile, ill or even hybrids from other subspecies such as Bengal or Indo-chinese tigers, says Dr Magintan.

On top of illness and age, Nik Mohd Zamani explains that one of the main obstacles to the tiger breeding programme is the suitability of pairing between the male and female.

"We lack male tigers at NWRC. We have only three really healthy male Malayan tigers.

"Because a tiger is an apex predator, a female can tell if a male is infirm with cataracts or joint issues and will not mate with it.

"Those born in captivity will also lack experience and this is a problem when we try to mate them," he says.

Because tigers are by nature solitary animals, the male and female tigers are placed in adjoining stalls for about three months to see if they can get along with each other. This is important as tigers can be killed during mating attempts if the animals are not habituated with each other.

According to Nik Mohd Zamani, sometimes, despite displaying interest behaviour in the male, such as low pitch vocalisation, rubbing against the bars of the stalls and rolling on the ground, an inexperienced female tiger might incorrectly move to the front during copulation.

"One tiger took three months – or cycles of being on heat – before it successfully mated," he says.

The mating process usually takes place over a period of around five to seven days, after which it's a matter of patience and observation to see if there is any good news.

"If the mating isn't successful, the female will be on heat again for her next cycle in the subsequent month," says Nik Mohd Zamani, indicating a pair, the female Tanjung and male Yeop Tapah, in a nearby stall.

"Breeding large carnivores is not easy. Domestic cats, now, that's easy," he chuckles.

Tiger cubs are born after a gestation period of between 112 and 115 days and – unlike the breeding programme involving giant pandas in China – left for the mother tigers in the NWRC to rear.

By a year or two old, the cubs are separated from their mothers to get the female tigers back on heat.

Tanjung and Yeop Tapah – named after the places where they were caught after running into conflict with residents – have successfully bred before, with Tanjung giving birth to a cub in 2020. Sadly, the cub did not survive.

Tanjung's other cub, Sungkai, born in 2014 from her pairing with a legendary tiger called Scarface, killed a female tiger during a mating session some years earlier.

Wild things

Despite this, however, Sungkai, explains Nik Mohd Zamani, is one of the first captive-born tigers at the NWRC to begin undergoing the rewilding process.

The male tiger, he says, still retains much of the nature inherited from his wild-caught parents and is thus considered a prime candidate for successful rewilding.

"When he sees humans passing by his stall, he would charge at them. That's a good thing. Tigers are wildlife, they are not pets," Nik Mohd Zamani points out.

Studies indicate that a wild male tiger's roaming territory may be as expansive as 300sq km; at the NWRC, however, Sungkai will have to be content for now with an exercise yard measuring only 50m by 50m.

This is where Sungkai takes turns with other tigers to be let out and where he is trained to hunt down animals that he would normally prey on in the wild.

So far, Sungkai, Nik Mohd Zamani is happy to report, has been quite the star pupil, successfully hunting and killing wild boars let loose in the enclosure for him.

"At first we gave him a live goat. He chased after it and bit it by the rump but left the prey still alive. This shouldn't be the case.

"So for his second time, we smeared blood on the prey animal's throat like how a serow (wild goat) would look like. He managed to make a proper kill by the third try," he explains.

Slowly, Sungkai graduated from killing goats to small wild boars. In 2020, he killed his first adult wild



The veterinarian team performing an in-vitro fertilisation procedure on a tiger at the centre last year. – Nuvista Media



The centre's three objectives are rescue, rehabilitation and release, says Dr Magintan.



Vehicles entering the centre have to drive through a trough of sanitising liquid to reduce contaminants coming into the compound to keep the animals safe. – Photos: LOW LAY PHON/The Star