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ECOWATCH

Crouching tigers, hidden cameras

Two filmmakers dove into Malaysia's ancient rainforest in search of its most elusive inhabitant, the Malayan tiger.

By SIM LEOI LEOI
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TO make her Malayan tiger documentary, film producer Lara Ariffin had to watch camera footage of a leaf moving in a jungle.

Really.

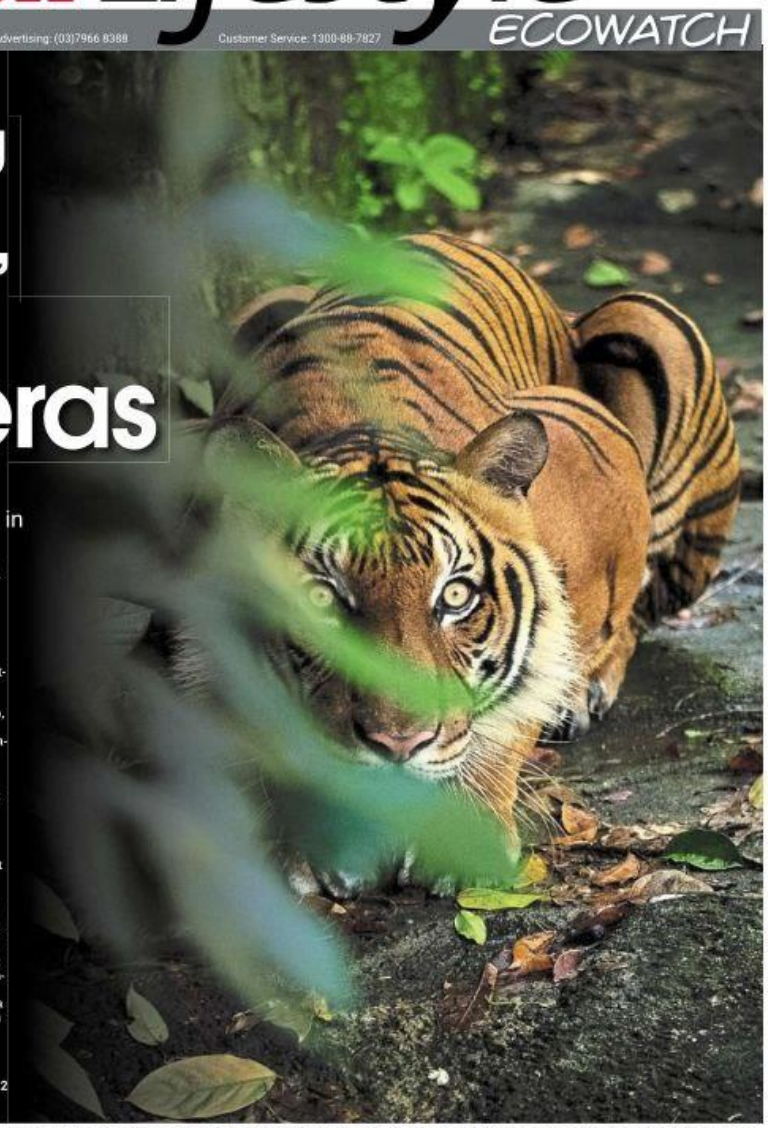
The fluttering foliage triggered a camera trap, one of many mounted by the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) and conservation groups such as Pelindung in over 400 locations in Taman Negara, Pahang as part of the National Tiger Survey.

"All this footage of this leaf," she groans. "But you're not sure because there might be a tiger, right? So you still end up having to go through all the footage," she reminisces with a laugh.

Lara, together with her husband, director Harun Rahman, and their small crew didn't just have to stake out the deep wilds of Taman Negara to try and catch an image of a Malayan tiger on camera, they also had to wade through a lot – "terabytes", says Harun – of images captured on camera traps to get their perfect shots of the elusive jungle cat.

Lara and Harun are talking to *The Star* about their experience filming their latest documentary, *Malaysia's Last Tigers*, from their home office in the leafy enclave of Bukit Tunku, Kuala Lumpur. We're sitting in the living room, which doubles as the office of Nuvista Media, in the company of one of the couple's cats, the *Felis catus*.

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A still from the documentary *Malaysia's Last Tigers*. Hidden cameras and a lot of patience captured awe-inspiring images of the elusive Malayan tiger that is on the brink of disappearing from Malaysia's remaining wild places. — Nuvista Media

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Malaysia's last tigers caught on film





Waiting patiently for their prey: Harun and Lara (not pictured) journeyed with their camera crew into parts of Taman Negara accessible only to scientists and researchers for their documentary. (Inset) The crew hid behind camouflage netting for hours. — Photos: Nuvista Media

It's a far cry from the pristine virgin rainforest of Taman Negara and that distant roar is more likely to be that of a passing motorcycle than the Malayan tiger, the *Panthera tigris jacksoni*. It's also years from when they first pitched the idea for the documentary in 2005.

Then tentatively called *Ghosts In The Garden Of Eden*, the idea, unfortunately, went nowhere.

"We were extremely frustrated as we believed that this was not only an important story for Malaysians but for the world," the couple has said in a statement accompanying the release of the documentary on the National Geographic Channel recently.

In the meantime, the husband and wife team got busy with other projects, producing and directing other award-winning films such as *Among The Great Apes With Michelle Yeoh* (2009), the history documentary *Rising Sun Over Malaya* (2013) and anti-poaching flick *On Borrowed Time* (2011).

"We did a whole series of films which kept us in touch with the subject matter," recalls Lara, 54.

When the couple finally received a small grant from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (better known by its Malay acronym, Finas) in 2018 for the project, they went ahead.

Only to run into another major obstacle....

The (very) secret garden

It turns out that the jungle the Malayan tiger lives in also camouflages it very well.

While there are viral videos made of the animals prowling the forest fringes of rubber and oil palm plantations or swimming in Perak's Temenggor lake – and in one case of canine distemper, wandering tamely among shocked residents of a Terengganu town – very few people have actually seen or filmed the magnificent predator in the wild.

In fact, many of the scientists studying the animal, including Hazril Rafhan, the head of Perhilitan's tiger unit who is featured in the documentary, have never seen one in the wild.

"You can hear the tiger, you can smell the tiger, [but it's] very unlikely to see the tiger. Very few people have," points out Harun, 56.

In fact, earlier on in the project, when the couple was trying to get funding from overseas, most people were not convinced that they would be able to film their subject in the wild.



Lara, who did the initial editing of footage from the camera traps, and Harun had to go through terabytes of images to distil what ended up in the documentary. — FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

"It's so difficult. Malaysia is not like India," explains Lara, adding that when they went for a holiday in India a few years ago, they saw seven wild tigers in a nature reserve within two days.

"It's a different landscape [than in India] and people need to respect the landscape here. It's very, very secretive.

"This is almost like we are revealing something very special inside that people have never seen," she says of the documentary.

While Bengal tigers, which are much more numerous in number, are relatively accustomed to the human presence, the Malayan tiger is notoriously shy.

A subspecies found only in Peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand, the Malayan tiger has suffered a devastating blow to its numbers; firstly, from habitat loss as jungles give way to development such as commercial agriculture, and secondly – and most lethally – from poachers who continue to stalk the animal for its parts.

Malaysia is one of only 13 countries in the world that still has wild populations of the tiger, but we only have an estimated 150 or fewer animals.

The declining numbers coupled with the profusely dense rainforest foliage make it nigh impossible to spot the species in the wild.

Though it is certainly not for a lack of trying.

The filmmakers, accompanied by Perhilitan officers, journeyed several times into the depths of Taman Negara to try to catch tigers on camera. To give a sense of perspective, Taman Negara, the country's largest national park that borders Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang, is six times the size of Singapore.

Travelling by canoes along rivers and traversing the jungle – and that alone could have made for a totally wild adventure documentary – they reached spots deep in the national park that are usually reserved only for conservation scientists.

They set up 30 camera traps only to have to leave them untended for six months while Malaysia entered its first lock down in March 2020 to get through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Once they could visit the cameras again, footage from them as well as from Perhilitan's cameras helped Lara and Harun to build up a picture of a tiger's life in the wild.

Along with the tigers, their cameras also captured a diverse array of animals, some of which are usually hidden from view behind the dense curtain of Malaysia's ancient rainforest.

While most of the animals that passed by the cameras are a relatively common sight, such as elephants ("many of our cameras were damaged by elephants!" complains Harun) and the occasional clouded leopard, some were extremely rare, like the endangered dhole, a type of wild dog, and the serow or mountain goat.

In the end, the time away from the project proved to be a boon for the filmmakers; when the couple finally embarked on the work, the quality of footage from the camera traps had improved tremendously, allowing them to craft their documentary almost entirely with it.

Stalked on camera

What alarmed Harun and Lara, who are both also members of conservation group Rimau, is how few tigers were captured in their camera traps.

"Maybe two," says Lara.

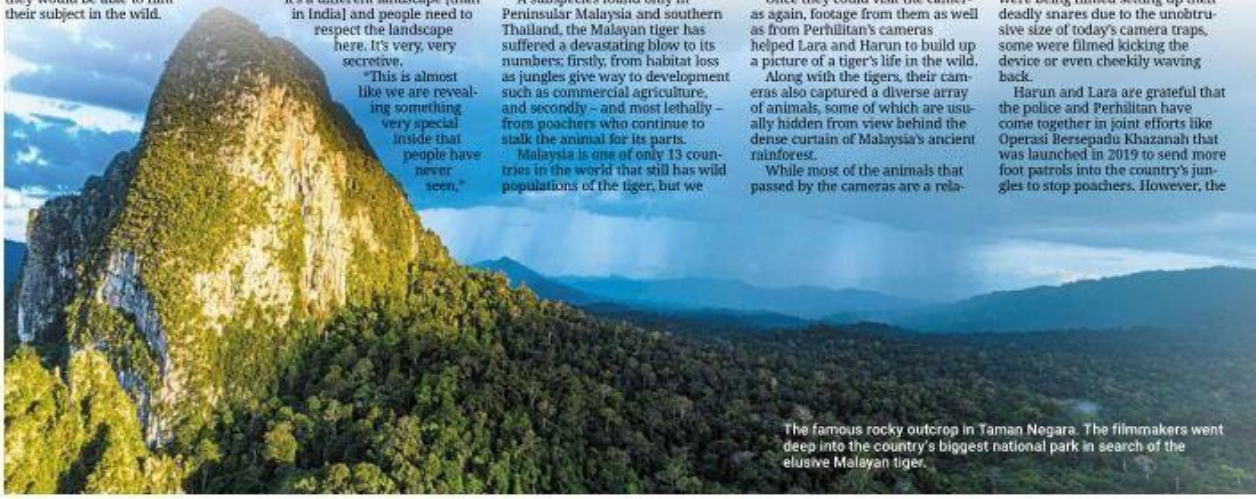
"Three," corrects Harun, adding that there were, however, "a lot, not one, not two" poachers captured on the official National Tiger Survey footage from the Perhilitan's camera traps.

"The camera traps show that the poachers are everywhere – whether it's a national park, a protected forest, a logged forest, poachers were there," Harun laments.

Sadly, also featured on their footage are many three-legged animals whose maimed limbs are a telltale sign they had run into the poachers and their wire snares.

While most of the time the poachers were unaware that they were being filmed setting up their deadly snares due to the unobtrusive size of today's camera traps, some were filmed kicking the device or even cheekily waving back.

Harun and Lara are grateful that the police and Perhilitan have come together in joint efforts like Operasi Bersepadu Khazanah that was launched in 2019 to send more foot patrols into the country's jungles to stop poachers. However, the



The famous rocky outcrop in Taman Negara. The filmmakers went deep into the country's biggest national park in search of the elusive Malayan tiger.

couple urges that "more still needs to happen".

Besides being what may be an elegy to the Malayan tiger, the 48-minute documentary, say Lara and Harun, is also a credit to the tireless efforts by Perhilitan and Forestry Department officers to track and protect animals – sometimes in extreme weather and precarious conditions.

"The people that are doing the National Tiger Survey, it's very difficult work.

"Imagine walking in a jungle for two weeks at a time in very difficult conditions. You're not carrying one camera trap, you're carrying 30 or 40 because you've got to put them in all the different locations," explains Harun.

He also points out that while Perhilitan gets called every time members of the public find themselves in conflict with wildlife, the agency is not responsible for the habitat loss that is usually the cause of the situation.



Veterinarians performing invitro fertilisation on a tiger at the National Wildlife Rescue Centre in Sungkai, Perak, where Perhilitan has begun a tiger breeding and rewilding programme in an effort to save the species.



A member of conservation group Rimau (in blue) with the Orang Asli patrol group Menraq examining wire snares set up by poachers in the Royal Belum forest.

Perhilitan has also recently commenced a tiger breeding and rewilding programme, focusing for the time being on the animals kept in captivity at its National Wildlife Rescue Centre in Sungkai, Perak.

Tyger, tyger burning ... not so bright

For a couple long fascinated by the tigers, making the film has been a dream come true but it has not been without poignancy as they look on an animal whose time in the wild may soon come to an end.

For Harun, making this documentary has been a macabre replay of sorts.

"We used to film the leatherback turtles and [they're] all gone. We filmed the Sumatran rhinos and [they're] all gone.

"To see this and to think that we will never ever see them again in the wild, it's sad," he says.

Leatherback turtles and the Sumatran rhinos are now extinct in the wild in Malaysia although they continue to exist in other parts of the world.

The couple hopes that the documentary – probably one of the most recent to feature actual footage of the Malayan tiger in the wild – will galvanise Malaysians into saving the creature whose image is seen on, among others, the country's coat of arms and our national sports people's uniforms.

"We are not scientists, we are not researchers. We are filmmakers and this is what we do and we know we do this well. So this is what we can do. We make a film about it, tell people about it and get people to join to find a solution," says Harun.

More than anything, Lara wants to save the tigers.

"Whatever you see on the film, they are Malaysia's last tigers. The numbers are so low that we are looking at the very last.

"So even if you see a mother tiger and its babies on the footage, you feel, are they going to make it? You're not sure so I think that part for me, is quite upsetting. But at the same time, it's also the cubs that bring hope.

"You do feel hopeful. You have to have some sort of a little bit of spark, it's not all doom and gloom.

"The dream is not over yet but we're coming close to full time already."

***Malaysia's Last Tigers* premièred on the National Geographic channel (Astro CH551 / Unifi TV CH508) on Sept 23. Catch the reruns tomorrow at 11pm, Thursday at 7pm and Friday at 4.10pm. It is also available on Astro on Demand.**

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