KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

SURAT KHABAR	:	THE SUN			
TARIKH	:	1/11/2021 (ISNIN)	MUKA SURAT	:	6
JABATAN	:	PERHILITAN			

Expedite initiatives to save our tigers

The Sun 01.11.2021_6

COMMENT by Dr Mark Rayan Darmaraj

THE Wildlife Conservation Society Malaysia Programme (WCS Malaysia) is heartened by the news that the Wildlife Conservation (Amendment) Bill 2021 has been passed, which provides heftier punishments for wildlife offenders ("Amendments to Act 716 more responsive to wildlife conservation current needs – Energy and Natural Resources Minister Datuk Seri Takiyuddin Hassan", theSun, Oct 26).

Some of the notable amendments include an increase in fines of up to RM1 million for certain offences, and an increase in jail terms up to fifteen years for others.

WCS Malaysia commends the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry and Wildlife and National Parks Department for spearheading the passing of this Bill, and looks forward to it being formally gazetted to potentially further deter poachers from carrying out their illegal activities.

In tandem with this, there is also a need to increase the number of enforcement personnel to patrol forests, beef up intelligence gathering and increase capacity building on gathering evidence to be able to prosecute wildlife offenders. This is particularly critical as we can have the best laws but will still lose the fight to conserve wildlife if we do not have sufficient enforcement capacity and resources to enforce the laws.

In the past couple of years, the government had initiated a couple of major initiatives to curb poaching and wildlife crime. The Biodiversity Protection and Patrolling Programme has been set up to mobilise hundreds of patrollers consisting of veteran army personnel and Orang Asli. This is one of the most significant initiatives for on-the-ground protection of wildlife, and also has active participation by environmental non-governmental organisations (NGO).

However, this needs to be sustainable over the long-term with the enabling of permanent hired positions to not only ensure consistent and sufficient boots on the ground but also as a means of sustained livelihood and empowerment for the Orang Asli as stewards of conservation.

Another notable initiative is Operasi Bersepadu Khazanah, led by the police and the Wildlife and National Parks Department, with participation by other enforcement agencies and environmental NGO.

Earlier this year, Operasi Bersepadu Khazanah won international recognition for being one of the winners of the 2020 Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for its role in the arrest of 87 wildlife offenders, destruction of 460 wire snares and seizures worth RM2.7 million.

This is another commendable initiative but to further strengthen these efforts, WCS Malaysia hopes that the formation of a Wildlife Crime Unit within the police force can be enabled to further aid enforcement as well as intelligence gathering on wildlife poaching and trade syndicates, in which the police is well equipped and trained to carry out.

No less significant is the announcement by Takiyuddin recently about the formation of a National Conservation Task Force (MyTTF) that would be chaired by the prime minister. This is exactly what environmental NGO in Malaysia have been advocating for the past decade, and this comes at a critical time when preliminary results from Malaysia's first National Tiger Survey have shown that there are less than 200 Malayan tigers remaining in the wild.

The formation of a Tiger Working Group (MyTWG) at the state level was also announced, which is much welcomed, as land is a state issue and the plight to save tigers would need to include efforts to halt habitat loss of tigers and restore connectivity in states that have the authority to do so.

Ultimately, how MyTTF and MyTWG structure themselves and work together will be crucial to ensure executive decisions on policy, allocation of resources, enforcement and land management favourable for tiger conservation to be made and implemented.

Our national symbol is on the line, and we must pull out all the stops to protect them from going extinct. Through various government-led initiatives rolled out over the past two years and with the recent announcements, Malaysia seems to be headed on the right direction in making a strong stand that we will not tolerate wildlife poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

WCS Malaysia is hopeful that through these efforts we will stand a chance to halt the decline and eventually recover our tiger population, provided these initiatives are backed up with committed political will, sufficient funding and resource allocation, continued multi-agency cooperation, particularly from the police, with stepped-up intelligence on wildlife poaching and trade syndicates that lead to arrests and prosecution, as well as unwavering commitment from states in halting natural forest clearing and fragmentation.

But time is of the essence, and how well we maximise the initiatives and plug the gaps will dictate how our wildlife will fare in the near future.

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