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BALIMBING JOURNAL

Trying to Save Wild Tigers by Rehabilitating Them

By NORIMITSU ONISHI Published: April 21, 2010

BALIMBING, Indonesia — The two wild Sumatran tigers, held in large, adjoining cages here, had killed at least eight people between them.



Kemal Jufri/Imaji

Tomy Winata, an Indonesian tycoon, finances a rehabilitation experiment for Sumatran tigers.

They growled ferociously, lunged at a man outside, ran in circles inside the cages and slammed against the walls, their eyes radiating a fierceness absent in zoo tigers. But if all goes well, one of them eventually will be reintroduced into the wild.

In the only one of two such experiments in the world, tiger experts here have begun rehabilitating and releasing tigers that have attacked humans and livestock elsewhere on Indonesia's island of Sumatra. As a growing human population and economic development keep squeezing tigers out of their remaining habitats, clashes are increasing with deadly frequency. Last year, tigers killed at least nine people in Sumatra, mostly illegal loggers pushing ever deeper into previously untouched forest.

In the past 20 months, conservationists have successfully returned four Sumatran tigers to the wild here, in what some experts describe as a promising strategy to help save the world's population of wild tigers — now below 3,000, or less than 3 percent of their numbers a century ago. The Sumatran tiger, with fewer than 400 left, is considered one of the most critically endangered of the world's six surviving tiger subspecies.

The tigers' release has drawn criticism, not least from local villagers who complain that they have lost goats and chickens to the predators, and now fear venturing outside at night. Some conservation groups, including the World Wildlife Fund, have hesitated to get involved with the program, which is financed by Tomy Winata, an Indonesian tycoon who parlayed close ties to the military into building an empire in real estate, banking, mining and other industries.

Mr. Winata, 51, runs his "tiger rescue center" out of the Tambling Nature Wildlife

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[Conservation](#), a 111,000-acre park that he acquired in the remote, southernmost tip of a peninsula sticking out of southwestern Sumatra.

“I give my life to this place,” he said. “A lot of people say I’m blah, blah, blah. But who can come here and do better than I have?”

John Seidensticker, a tiger expert and the head of the [Conservation Ecology Center](#) at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Washington, said that until recently so-called conflict tigers were captured and simply put in zoos in Indonesia, “so much so that they filled up.”

Mr. Seidensticker, who visited the center here last year, said that it was too soon to tell how the released tigers will fare in the long run but that Mr. Winata’s efforts had impressed him.

“He’s been a pioneer in this effort,” Mr. Seidensticker said in a telephone interview. “Most people are a little bit afraid to take that next step with the problem animal and turn it loose.”

In the only other program of this kind, the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) has released and monitored five Amur tigers in the Russian Far East in the past decade. Results have been mixed: two remained near human settlements and were eventually poached; one returned to the wild but was also poached; a fourth slipped its collar after 10 months; a fifth, released in January, is now being monitored.

In Balimbing, workers try to recondition the tigers, mostly through isolation from people, so they grow to fear human beings again. Tigers instinctively stay away from people, but conflict tigers have lost that fear to varying degrees, said Tony Sumampau, who is spearheading the rehabilitation program here.

“Once tigers kill human beings,” Mr. Sumampau said, “they realize that we’re nothing.”

In July 2008, the center released its first two tigers — males that villagers believed had killed people — after collaring them with GPS tracking devices. According to the signals, one has established a territory inside the conservation area to the north while the other has moved farther north to the adjoining Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, Mr. Sumampau said. Two more, freed a few months ago, remain closer to the tiger center.

But center officials were proceeding cautiously with the two caged tigers because they were known to have killed people. A male, at least 10 years old, is too weak to survive back in the wild. But officials hoped to release a female named Salma, who, they believe, killed six villagers suspected of taking her cubs.

About 30 local tigers are also believed to inhabit this remote area. With roads impassable during the rainy season, the only way to reach Balimbing recently was by traveling four hours aboard a small fishing boat.

Mr. Winata, who usually flies here in one of his helicopters or planes, said he employed 80 permanent workers as part of an annual \$1.5 million budget. He said he became interested in wildlife after he started working at the age of 15, on the rural islands of Borneo and Papua, for a company that built military housing.

Now, as the head of the Artha Graha conglomerate, Mr. Winata owns a good chunk of central Jakarta. And yet he pronounced himself bored with his business.

“Only stupid people can’t do real estate,” he said, claiming that his only passion was the center, which he visits once a month.

Mr. Winata often meets with leaders from the small village. One of them, Khusairi Raja, said that in addition to jobs, Mr. Winata had provided the village with free health care and schooling. But Mr. Winata had also begun enforcing environmental laws that had hurt the villagers’ farming and fishing activities, he said.

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Neni Sarmaya, 22, said she was now afraid to go into the forest alone because of the tigers. “We haven’t benefited at all from the release of the tigers,” she said.

Sujadi, 53, who uses only one name, like many Indonesians, grumbled that he was given \$17, instead of the market value of \$28, for a goat lost to a tiger.

Mr. Sumampau said that GPS signals indicated that a freed tiger had attacked livestock shortly after its release in July 2008 but that subsequent claims had been disproved. Indeed, because of all the false claims, Mr. Winata said he no longer handed out compensation for lost livestock.

“They just want to make money,” Mr. Winata said of villagers. “Many of them now have mobile phones with cameras. If they take a photo of one of the tigers eating a chicken or goat, show it to me. I’ll pay them \$1,000.”

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