

Species die out at a rapid rate

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Indian tiger

SCIENTISTS suggest there are as few as 3200 tigers left in the world - a devastating statistic for what is considered a culturally significant and beautiful "king of the jungle".

At the top of the food chain, tigers are the largest Asian big cat.

"However, they are also among the most vulnerable and threatened species on Earth," according to the World Wildlife Fund.

For more than a million years they roamed from eastern Turkey east to Russian, north to Siberia and south to Bali. But by the end of the 20th century, the Bali, Javan and Caspian tigers were extinct.

The remaining six subspecies look set to suffer the same fate, largely due to deforestation, the illegal wildlife trade, poaching and conflict with people. If the trend continues, they will be extinct in the next 12 years.

The WWF lists tigers as one of the 35 priority species, a "big iconic megaphone" for conservation, says WWF's Lydia Gaskell. The organisation is blunt about the future of the tiger: "If we do not respond to the plight of wild tigers and the needs of the communities that share their home with tigers - most of which is outside protected wildlife areas - we will witness the loss of one of the world's natural wonders of our lifetime."

Most conservationists agree the establishment and protection of wildlife reserves, as well as strict international legislation against smuggling, have been key to the tiger's survival so far.

However, as conservation journalist Craig Kasnoff has said, wildlife conservation and habitat protection are not isolated solutions but part of a multifaceted tiger survival strategy.