Reinstatement of Tigers in Cambodia

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The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the government of Cambodia have recently agreed to launch a plan to reintroduce tigers to Cambodia. The project will start in 2019 and consists of reinstating 25 tigers over the next ten years in protected areas in the country. According to WWF conservation experts, the reintegration will make the ecosystem a healthier and more balanced environment. However, opponents to this project have expressed it will solely benefit Cambodia’s economy without actually impacting the welfare of tigers.

According to conservation experts, tigers in Cambodia have been functionally extinct since 2007. As opposed to the common misconception that extinction means the absolute disappearance of species, “functional extinction” means that the natural habitat of a species is no longer sufficiently viable for it to play a role in the ecosystem or to contribute to the food chain of other species. In this case, the last tiger was seen in 2007. In starting again with the breeding population, conservation groups have asked the government for two male tigers and five to six females. This plan is consistent with the Tx2 project, which aims at doubling wild tigers by 2022—the next Chinese year of the Tiger.

The main reason for conservationists to support this plan is the alarming decline in the world’s tiger population. Tigers have been in danger due to illegal poaching and loss of their natural habitat. Another reason for supporting this plan is the role these animals play in the ecosystem. Tigers are key predators in the food chain because they maintain a balance among carnivores and herbivores. Additionally, people also benefit from their conservation because with tiger conservation comes forest conservation—an important resource for our daily lives.

Opponents have expressed concern that Cambodia has done little to address forestation for the tigers’ habitat. Illegal poaching and deforestation are significant problems in the country. Further, it is said that the country’s primary interests are to boost economic input and to attract donors. Moreover, critics have mentioned that the plan of reinstating a few tigers randomly into the area would only endanger the tigers and the people living nearby. Even Thomas Gray, WWF’s Greater Mekong species manager, has admitted that the project represents a risk that may result in failure.

Whether or not this plan takes place in 2019, Cambodia and the WWF must keep in mind the Tx2 project and the goal of this plan: to increase the tiger population. It is of paramount importance that the government of Cambodia addresses the necessary resources to conserve the tigers’ habitat and forests, and to adopt better, stronger legislation to prevent and punish illegal poaching. Furthermore, both bodies have to increase efforts to work closely together against the self-interests of the public and private sectors.


Michael Peel, Cambodia tiger plan sparks roaring match over wisdom of aid, Financial Times https://next.ft.com/content/e33ab944-0d26-11e6-9cd4-2be898308be3 (last visited May 17, 2016).