

# WWF



# news

All creatures  
great and  
small

– centre pages

WINTER 1997/98

# On patrol with the poacher hunters

The forests of the Russian Far East are outstanding for their biodiversity – and for being home to Siberian tigers. These magnificent creatures have been brought back from the verge of extinction thanks to an international effort. Since 1993 WWF has been supporting the work of anti-poaching brigades. To see how effective they really are, international conservation officer Paul Toyne paid a visit and accompanied them into action.

A WWF-sponsored anti-poaching brigade operates from the offices of Department Tiger in Kharbarovsk, Russia. It is a tragic indictment of the daily threat these creatures are under that such a brigade is needed: the 50-plus adult Siberian tigers inhabiting Kharbarovsk Krai, which is the northern limit of their range, are hunted by poachers. They want fur and bones for illegal sale in both national and international markets.

**Dateline: 8:30am, Wednesday  
17 September 1997**

## Department Tiger offices in Kharbarovsk, Russia

The brigade, consisting of five people led by Oleg Gunin, is today visiting the game reserve of Kheristik, south of Kharbarovsk. As we travel in their four-wheel drive van Oleg Gunin explains the role of the brigade: "The brigade was set up in 1993 to assist in the management of regional wildlife resources. We cover the whole of the southern region of Kharbarovsk Krai which tigers are known to inhabit. We go out for four or five days at a time, carrying out raids based on information and intelligence we've previously collected." Such anti-poaching excursions are hard for the brigade members: for Oleg Gunin it means leaving his wife and two small children.

The van heaves up and down, we've left the main road and are now travelling along forest roads damaged by large gullies formed by the combined actions of water, snow and ice. We encounter several people who, much to my amazement, are able to

navigate their Ladas along such roads. "These people are mushroom pickers and berry collectors, activities that are permitted where we are now but not in the game reserve or zapovednik (a protected wilderness area)." The brigade randomly stops a few people to ensure they are carrying up to date permits and no illegal arms.

We travel on further before stopping at a spot where, earlier this year, a female tiger had two cubs. The brigade wants to check a section of her territory. We get out and start looking for paw prints, tiger faeces (scats), trees bearing tiger scratches and places along trails where she may have marked her territory with urine. Oleg Gunin, like most brigade heads, is a trained wildlife ranger with 17 years of experience so he knows all the tell-tale signs.

## Hunters

The brigade members also check for tracks left by professional poachers or local hunters who may also be aware of the tiger's territory. A tiger scat, a few days old, and a scratching post bearing tiger claw marks are found, confirming that the tiger was still around. Thankfully no evidence of human activity is found.

But as we leave the territory we notice a car cleverly concealed down a forest track. We stop immediately and go over to inspect it. There is no-one there, so we decide to hide and wait. When the owner

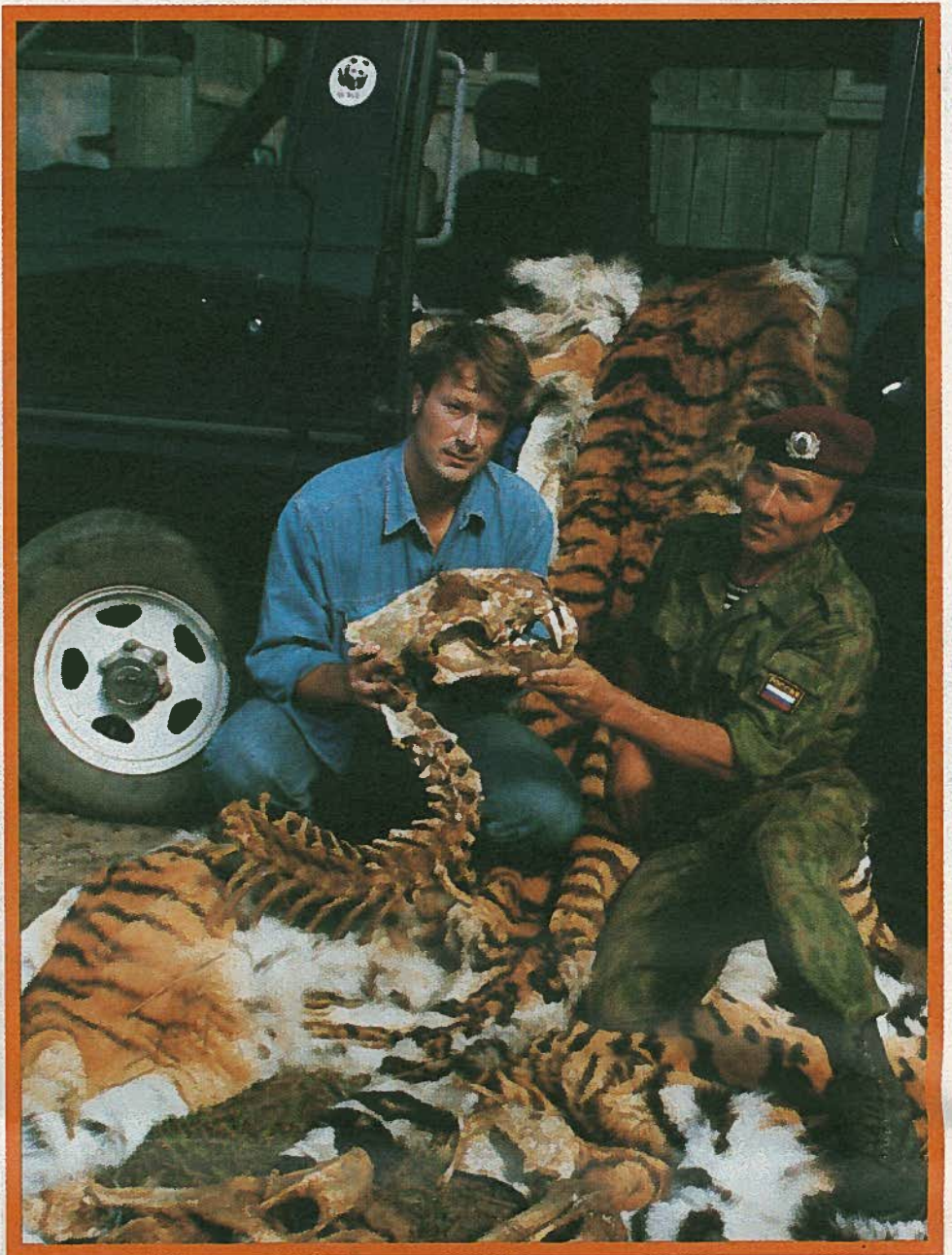
returns he is carrying a large basket of mushrooms. Oleg Gunin asks if he can inspect the car, where he finds a pistol. At first the driver denies any knowledge of the gun, but then admits it is his son's. He has left the documentation at home. Because carrying a pistol without the appropriate documentation is an offence, the gun is confiscated.

The gun's owner will have to visit the brigade's offices and pay a 100,000 rouble (\$18) fine to get it back. To replace the gun will cost \$60 so he will make the trip and pay the fine. Such a fine, however, is a strong deterrent to those using unlicensed arms as an average monthly salary is between \$100-200. Such actions by this, and the five other WWF brigades, are working. All have noticed a decline in the number of arms they confiscate which indicates fewer are being carried.

"Over the course of the last three years the number of tigers poached annually has declined thanks to the work of these teams."

## Bones

The brigades are also confiscating tiger skins and bones. These are destroyed after being used as evidence in court cases. Back in the office, Oleg Gunin shows me one skin from a tiger thought to be only 18 months old – its siblings are also believed dead. This slaughter happened two years ago but this skin has only just surfaced. The other two skins have not been found... nor have the poachers, but the man who was caught selling the skin was sent to jail for two years.



Right: WWF's international conservation officer, Paul Toyne and Vladimir Dukarev, head of the Ussurisk brigade, with captured tiger skins and bones. The haul is burnt to avoid it finding its way onto the black market.



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Top left: The Khabarovsk brigade covers an area roughly twice the size of Wales where, it reports, some 64 to 71 tigers live.

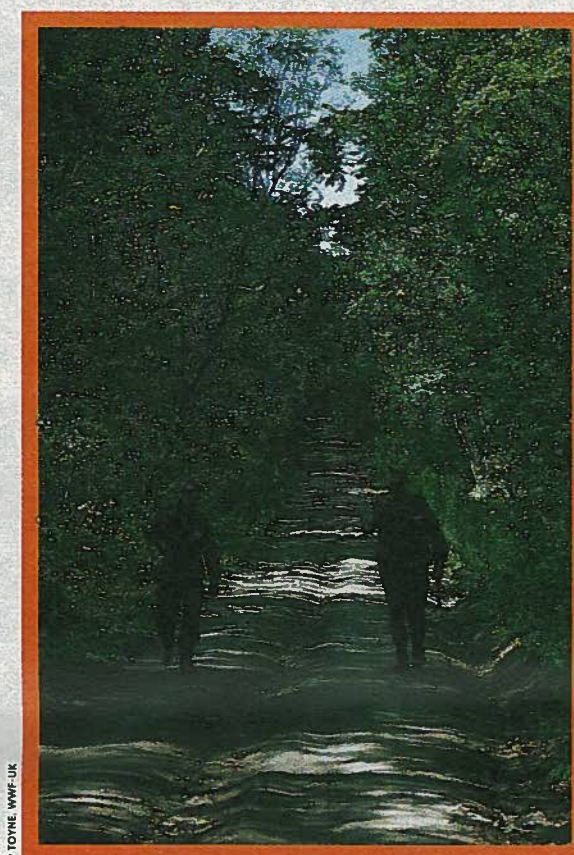
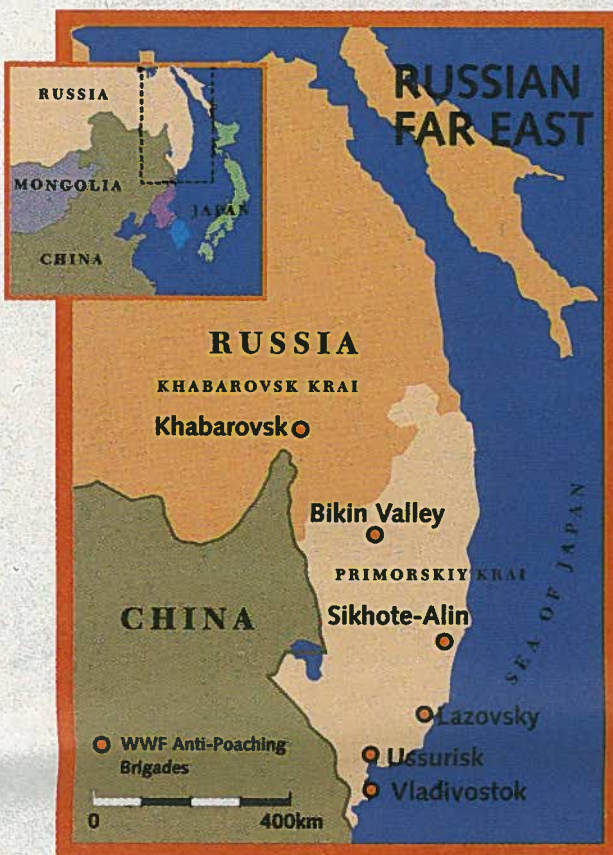
Top centre: The driver of this car was found with a gun, but without a permit and so faces a 100,000 rouble fine – on average, equivalent to half a week's work.

Top right: The brigade discovers tiger prints at the water's edge. The frequency and size (seven cm across the centre pad), indicates there are two cubs in the area.

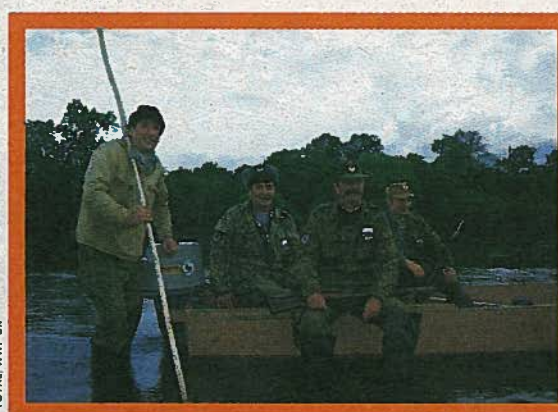
Centre right: Pavel Fomenko (left), WWF's Siberian tiger co-ordinator, with members of the Bikin brigade.

Bottom right: The Bikin brigade regularly stops and searches river traffic.

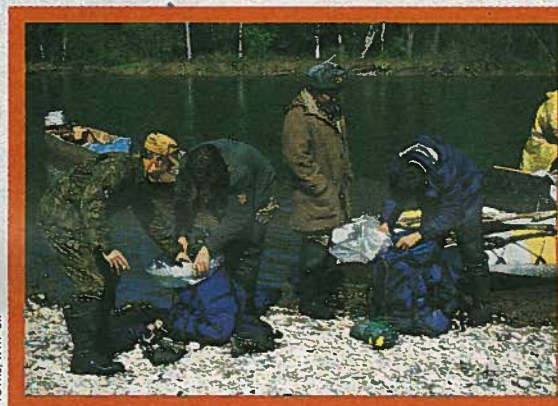
Centre: Patrolling on foot, the Khabarovsk brigade searches for signs of tigers... and signs of poachers.



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The day before, Vladimir Dukarev, head of the Ussurisk brigade, had shown me four tiger skins and a set of bones – the result of the brigade's undercover operations. The skins were being sold for \$2,000 and a skin with bones would cost \$5,000 – about three years' average annual salary. One man was arrested, and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

As both Khabarovsk and Ussurisk are close to the Chinese border, the brigades have to contend with gangs of Chinese criminals trying to make money out of everything from drugs and weapons to nature. "In Khabarovsk we have found that wealthy Russians are the main market for tiger skins but bones are still very much in demand in China despite strict penalties," said Oleg Gunin.

This trade route through Khabarovsk to China is being stopped by the brigade, but the increasing internal market is worrying Vladimir Bukarev. "We've found that skins and bones are now entering European markets through Moscow connections – this new trading route will put more poaching pressures on the remaining tigers in this region."

Over the course of the last three years the number of tigers poached annually has declined thanks to the work of these teams. Poaching figures are now around 13 to 18 a year, nowhere near the estimated 60 to 70 poached in the early 1990s which, if it had continued, would have led to the tiger's extinction.

Poachers, hunters and local people know of the brigades and they get full support from the local

communities. "Most professional hunters like to see nature and the tiger is our symbol of nature – we do not want to lose it," said Zhenya Smirnov, head of the Bikin brigade. He and his team patrol the picturesque Bikin River valley, stopping boats travelling to and from an indigenous people's protected zone. "Before we were in operation it was chaos. People from everywhere would hunt, fish and collect – and this would include poaching tigers, bears and collecting ginseng."

As we travelled in a canoe (powered by a new engine provided by WWF funds), Zhenya Smirnov told me that the Bikin brigade is doing a lot more than just stopping tiger poaching: it is enforcing strict regulations on the use of wildlife resources. Its work is very different from the brigades that are based in main trading centres such as Vladivostok, Ussurisk and Khabarovsk and different tactics are used.

Local people respect the brigade's work, but some local hunters find life difficult due to the current economic situation. As one hunter, Sasha, explained: "Under the Soviet regime I could sell my skins and pelts for a set price. Now this price has fallen and there is no guaranteed market – to be honest I can no longer make a living from legal hunting."

Hanging up to dry in his kitchen was a bear's gall bladder. He smiled, knowing I now understood how he might supplement his decreasing income. He opened a tin box and showed me the root of ginseng, a highly desired plant for its medicinal qualities,

"To be honest I can no longer make a living from legal hunting."