

International news

Endangered Siberian tigers flee forest fires

WWF-funded brigades in action as blaze destroys dwindling habitat

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Fires are sweeping through 600 sq km of forest in far eastern Russia, the last stronghold of the critically endangered Siberian tiger.

The fires, stoked by high winds, are raging in the territory where the majority of the remaining 450 tigers live. The area is particularly vulnerable to uncontrolled fires because of the dismantling of the Russian forest and environmental services, and the resulting lack of firefighting resources.

The fires are being tackled by brigades set up two years ago by the wildlife protection charity WWF. Fed by strong winds, they are concentrated in the south of the Khabarovsk region, where the last census reported 90 to 100 tigers, and in northern and central parts of the Primorskiy region, where another 250 live.

Dr Paul Toyne, the WWF's international conservation officer, said: "This is a potential disaster because it means the

loss of the most suitable remaining habitat for tigers. They are strong and fast enough to outrun the fires and will probably survive, but what do they do then?

"They will immediately be in the territory of other tigers and will have to fight for a new territory or move on. If they win they will probably kill this year's cubs of the defeated tiger ... if defeated, they will probably run out of forest to hide and come into contact with man."

Tiger numbers have dropped to dangerously low levels because of poaching for Chinese medicines and loss of forest cover. The range of this sub-species, also known as the Amur tiger, used to extend far into China but the forest now stops at the Russian border.

The range now reaches as far as Vladivostok in the east but further north, where game is scarcer, tigers are rare.

The main means to combat this year's fires are six fire brigades funded by the WWF. About 200 people and 30 vehicles are involved in the present



operations. The WWF has been working to prevent fires in the Russian far-east for three years, with the protection of the Siberian tiger habitat as one of its main objectives.

"In one sense fires are a natural part of the forest cycle, especially during the dry season," Dr Toyne said. "But they need to be controlled and not allowed to sweep vast areas."

Major fires occurred in October 1998 and in May and July

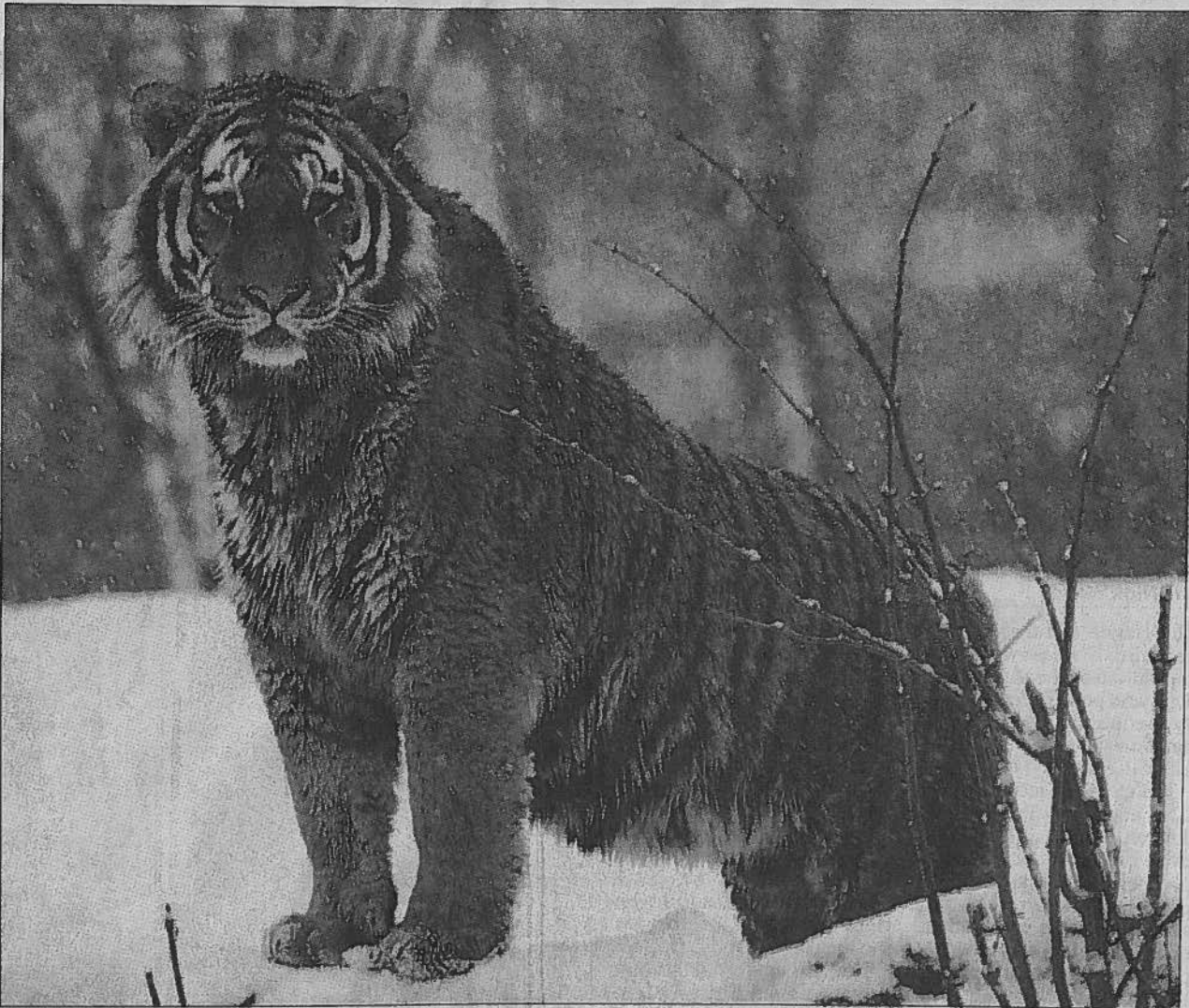
1999 in the Khabarovsk and Primorskiy areas. The WWF believes the main reason for this year's blaze is a combination of a very dry summer and carelessness by people hunting, fishing and mushroom picking.

The fire brigade project began in 1999. Apart from vehicles, the WWF contributed clothing and special equipment, hundreds of mobile phones and 21 water pumps, together costing £1m.

"Today we do not have any other equipment to battle against the fires than that provided by the WWF," Nikolai Seltin, a Russian forestry director, confirmed.

The WWF's work to protect the Siberian tigers includes the creation of anti-poaching brigades and the monitoring of commercial logging.

The promotion of sustainable forestry and protected areas has begun to bring about a reversal in the long decline in tiger numbers, but keeping enough suitable forest habitat is vital.



There are now estimated to be only 450 Siberian tigers left in the fast-receding forests of far-east Russia Photograph: NHPA