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Restoring Tigers to the Caspian Region

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Efforts to save Tigers in their native habitat are faring badly (1–3). Although counts of living tigers have been contested (e.g., “Counting India’s wild tigers reliably,” K. U. Karanth *et al.*, Letters, 13 May, p. 791), it is clear that four of nine recognized tiger subspecies are extinct, and the census of wild tigers has plummeted from 100,000 a century ago to less than 3500 today. At the November 2010 Tiger Summit in St. Petersburg, 13 Tiger Range States pledged to reverse the extinction process and set a goal of doubling wild tiger numbers by 2022, the next Chinese Year of the Tiger (4).

Despite intense interest, resolve, expertise, and expenditure in the realm of millions of U.S. dollars, traditional conservation approaches are proving insufficient. It is time to consider new approaches.

One provocative proposal is to reintroduce tigers into selected habitat within the historic range of the now-extinct Caspian tigers (5). Tigers disappeared from the region 40 years ago, but detailed ecological assessments have identified over one million square kilometers of potentially suitable habitat in a Caspian region as large as the continental United States (2, 6). Recent genetic analyses found the difference between the living Amur tigers and the extinct Caspians to be negligible (7). There are 500 genetically healthy Amur-Caspian tigers in managed zoo collections and up to a few thousand more among the roughly 15,000 captive generic tigers—i.e., those with unknown subspecies ancestry—worldwide (8, 9). These tigers can be a source for reintroduction once they are sufficiently acclimated and the habitats in question have been appropriately prepared (preparation may include fostering natural habitats, boosting the prey base, supporting antipoaching law enforcement, relocating human settlements, and stabilizing freshwater resources).

Specialists from the 13 current Tiger Range States alongside the 12 central Asian countries where Caspian tigers roamed a generation ago, particularly the Republic of Kazakhstan,

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should evaluate the prospects for identifying suitable habitat and planned reintroduction in the Caspian areas (5). In March 2011, the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan pledged government support and funds for preparation of territories of future release (5).

The tiger is an apex predator; the entire habitat is affected by its absence. We suggest restoring former landscapes to be as biologically full, diverse, productive, and interesting as they once were.

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