

WILDCAT CONSERVATION LEGAL AID SOCIETY

WILDCAT CHAT

March 2010

Dear Wildcat Friends:

On March 13, 2010, I received a news alert regarding an article appearing in "The Times of India," 11 Siberian tigers starved to death after assault on keeper at China zoo:



BEIJING: Keepers of a zoo in China have practiced a variation of the "badla" theme of Bollywood over several months. They have managed to starve 11 tigers to death and shot down two others after a big cat attacked one of the staff members last year.

Wild life experts have been asking China to end excess in-house breeding of tigers because animal handlers either do not have enough training or financial capability to feed them. But the government in China, which is celebrating the year of the tiger, is refusing to accept the criticism.

Yin Hong, deputy director of the state forestry administration, has said the slide in the population of wild tigers is not related to farm breeding. "The fast disappearing natural habitat and cross-border illegal trade are major causes (for shrinking wild tiger population), rather than the farms," he said. Yin said the government is helpless about breeding farms because they were established before the ban of tiger products was enforced.

At least 11 Siberian tigers have died for want of food at the Shenyang Forest Wild Life Zoo, a private enterprise in northeast China's Liaoning province, the China News Agency quoted Liu Xiaoqiang, a local wildlife protection official, as saying.

"For each day, the tigers get only one or two chickens. Even that stingy meat won't come now; some have starved for two days already," said Xiaoqiang.

Food supply at the Shenyang Forest Wild Life Zoo was not enough for over 30 tigers kept in narrow confines. This resulted in heart and renal failures, hemorrhagic enteritis and myocarditis, reports said.

Keepers also shot dead two other Siberian tigers after they assaulted a feeder last November.

China has 6,500 tigers bred in 12 farms besides dozens kept in private and publicly run zoos. Environmentalists have repeatedly complained that the market for tiger products is expanding and it is difficult to distinguish which of them come from farm bred animals and those poached from the forests.

This story is in every way, shape and form, a tragedy and ought to serve as notice to everyone who breed, trade, or keep tigers or any wildcats in any captive environment.

*All cats, wild and domestic are strict or obligate carnivores period! In a research article by Duane Ullrey on the nutrient requirements of carnivores, Ullrey states that felids are strict carnivores and in the wild, obtain most of their food by predation on the tissues of mammals, birds, or fish. Their domestic representative, the cat (*felis catus*), differs in several respects in its metabolism and nutrient requirements from the domestic dog; a canid that is a facultative carnivore. It is presumed that these differences are an evolutionary consequence of their respective ancestral diets. The cat has a higher dietary requirement for protein because it has only a limited ability to regulate nitrogen losses in the urine—losses that are of little consequence when nitrogen (protein) intakes are high, as they would be when whole animal prey are consumed. Further, the cat is particularly sensitive to a deficiency of the essential amino acid arginine—a deficiency that results in toxic levels of ammonia in the blood but which is unlikely when whole animals are consumed. They also have a dietary requirement for taurine, a sulfur containing amino acid that can be synthesized from methionine by the tissues of most other mammals after weaning. An experimental taurine deficiency resulted in central retinal degeneration and cardiomyopathy in the cat. Fortunately, taurine requirements in felids can be met by consuming whole animals. Additionally, the intestinal tract of all cats is much shorter than ours. They do not have the ability to fully digest and utilize the nutrients in plant material. Although they might get enough protein from plant material to exist, they need taurine in order to thrive! Taurine is found primarily in the muscle meat of animals and is highly concentrated in the heart and liver.*

The process of starvation is a relatively slow and painful death. The tiger's body will start to deal with malnutrition by breaking down its own fat, followed by tissue and muscle, and will eventually lose half of its normal body weight. The symptoms of starvation include: a reduction in the size of vital organs and loss of their functions; anemia; chronic diarrhea; reduction in muscle mass and weakness; lowered body temperature and extreme sensitivity to cold; decreased ability to digest any food due to lack of digestive acid; irritability; immune deficiency; and swelling from fluid build up under the skin. The final stages of starvation include a host of neurological and psychiatric symptoms including hallucinations and convulsions as well as severe muscle pain and weakness, and disturbances in heart rhythms. It takes up to three months for starvation to result in death.

Think for just a moment how you feel if you are deprived of your 10 a.m. breakfast, 1 p.m. lunch or worse your 3 p.m. pick me up. Now in comparison, imagine how a potentially 600 pound natural predator who biologically is required to have a minimum of 7 to 10 pounds of meat a day, is not fed, does not even have access to at least some clean water, and is locked in a cage, perhaps no bigger than a Victorian sized clothes closet! I cannot even try to imagine the frustration and pain these tigers had to endure before death finally came and relived them of their tortured captive life.

It is also no wonder (go back to your 3 p.m. need for a granola or candy bar to adjust that sluggish low blood sugar feeling) that tigers will go after a "human" whether a keeper or visitor, if they are in any stage of starvation. We can and do become prey for a big cat. Think again about how you feel if you don't get your usual meals and snacks. Do you start to feel irritable, frustrated, angry, and unable to concentrate and think abstractly? At this point, your sole mission is to satisfy your body's need for nutrition and relieve your deprived state. These cats go through the same process. If tigers or any big cat in this state go after what ever may come along to relieve their need for food, they can hardly be blamed if the food they seek is of human form.

This tragedy is not however, a unique or single event to this particular zoo in China— it happens all over the world including the U.S. Cats held by private owners, breeders, entertainers, zoos, sanctuaries, etc., that can no longer afford to feed large carnivores, often results in feeding them chicken parts (because it's cheap), the remains of other dead animals they may have or even road kill. Natural prey for tigers is deer and wild boars not chicken parts! I know grown men who can consume at least a half of a whole chicken or more in one sitting. How could this ever be enough food or provide the proper nutritional requirements to keep an adult 600 pound tiger healthy?

In the U.S., the licensing requirements under the Animal Welfare Act require a nutrition plan. What it does not require is proof of long-term financial resources set aside solely to properly care for and feed the cats. Unlike domestic cats, you cannot simply go to the pet store or market and buy a \$10.00 bag of cat chow! No captive big cat should ever starve to death because the human who either brought them into this world or bought them do not know how and/or cannot afford to feed them. We bring them into the world for commercial gain and entertainment then we have to and need to take care of them!

Please visit our Year of the Tiger page for the latest tiger news, reports, and events: <http://www.wcclas.org/yearofthetiger>

I welcome your comments and questions. Email: wildcatchat@wcclas.org

Signing off,

Lisa