

Nationalism in Tiger Conservation: Should Tigers Have a Passport?

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ABSTRACT

Nationalism can solidify national unity and ideology but sometimes causes conflicts in human societies. Interestingly, it affects tiger conservation as well. Collaborative efforts are imperative for tiger conservation due to their vast home ranges which cross political boundaries and the limited financial resources. However, tiger states have not shown substantial commitment to collaboration. The nationalism that is entrenched in tiger conservation provides a credible explanation for this passive collaboration among nations. One type of nationalism occurs within a country by favoring one particular subspecies over another. The other type of nationalism occurs when former range countries want tigers. Instead of contributing to saving tigers in current habitats, they are eager to bring tigers back to their political boundaries regardless of the tremendous financial resources required and the lower chance of success. Considering nationalism in tiger conservation, tigers, just like humans, may need a passport for a better chance to survive.

Keywords: Nationalism, *Panthera tigris*, Reintroduction, Tiger

Introduction

State and political boundaries provide people with stability and security but also restrict their movement or behaviors without physical barriers such as fences. Often, nationalism is closely related to the state and consolidates its status. As significant groups of people are reluctant to share their rights and benefits with newcomers or minor groups in states, nationalism causes conflicts in human societies. Conflicts with immigrants in the United States and Europe, disputes in borders between the United States and Mexico, and tensions with Kurdish people in Turkey, Syria, and Iran show how nationalism can affect

human society (Coleman, 2007; Ergil, 2000; Hobsbawm & Kertzer, 1992; Yeğen, 2007).


Interestingly, nationalism is not limited to human society; it affects tiger conservation as well. Tigers are a globally endangered species. Once flourishing across Asia, they have lost 93% of their territories in the past century, and their population has dropped dramatically from over 100,000 to approximately 3,500 because of poaching, lack of prey, loss of habitats, and conflicts with humans (Dinerstein *et al.*, 2006; Walston *et al.*, 2010). Simultaneously, three tiger subspecies, the Caspian (*Panthera tigris virgate*), Javan (*Panthera tigris sondaica*), and Bali tigers (*Panthera tigris balica*), have become extinct. A single nation's effort is far from sufficient, politically, structurally, and financially, to protect this predator from extinction. As tigers require a vast home range and do not discriminate against man-made political boundaries, neighboring nations in tiger territories should work collaboratively.

To combat the demand for tiger body parts worldwide, one of the main reasons for tiger poaching, an interna-

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tional collaboration among the tiger-range countries and consumer countries where tiger parts are traded, is essential. Most tiger range countries are classified as “low income” or “low & middle income” by the World Bank (World Bank, 2022) and can hardly support tiger conservation without financial and technical help from outside, including international organizations and other developed nations. Although international cooperation is an important component of tiger conservation, tiger states have not shown substantial commitment to collaboration. Nationalism entrenched in tiger conservation provides a credible explanation of this passive collaboration among nations. The symbolic and spiritual value of tigers stimulates the nations’ desire for ownership of tigers. As a result, it restrains international cooperation in tiger conservation based on the idea that tigers have no passports or political boundaries.

Case Report

Nationalism has appeared in different forms and levels. Similar to conflicts with immigrants in the United States and Europe, one form of nationalism in tiger conservation occurs within a country by the favoritism of one particular subspecies over another. For example, China used to harbor three tiger subspecies, the South China (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*), Amur (*Panthera tigris altaica*), and Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*). Of the three subspecies, South China tigers are the only subspecies that live exclusively in China, and experts believe that there is no viable population in the wild (Tilson *et al.*, 2004). While Amur and Bengal tigers have a much higher chance to recover in China, China had made an uncompetitive effort to restore South China tigers in the past (Qin *et al.*, 2015; Tilson *et al.*, 2010). Over-emphasis on saving the nationally-unique species would effectively remove the opportunity to survive from among any remaining species. Thankfully, China has committed to Amur tiger conservation in collaboration with Russia in the recent decade.

Similar to disputes in borders between the United States and Mexico, nationalism triggers conflicts in tiger conservation in transboundary areas of tiger range countries. When tigers cross the border of two countries, their fate does not rely wholly on one nation. Therefore, to develop a proper conservation strategy and manage ecological corridors effectively, international collaboration is imperative. However, often only one country makes a concerted effort to protect tigers through solid law enforcement and active patrol. In contrast, the neighboring country is reluctant to take such actions, sometimes because tigers stay within their political boundaries for less time. Therefore, they are afraid that they cannot claim the “ownership” of the tigers or do not consider the tigers as theirs. Ironically, all tiger range countries contributed towards a

National Tiger Action Plan at the Tiger Summit in 2010, emphasizing international collaboration (IISD, 2010).

Similar to the tensions with Kurdish people in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, nationalism in tiger conservation between the current and former tiger range nations has distorted the tiger conservation effort. Tiger conservation costs are quite high compared with other mammals due to their large territory and secretive nature. The current tiger range nations usually cannot afford these interventions themselves, as mentioned earlier. Due to the high cost, systematic scientific research, which provides comprehensive conservation guidelines, has not been done in all tiger habitats. Therefore, one of the most critical agendas in current tiger conservation is prioritizing the conservation effort and distributing limited resources adequately to secure the future of tigers (Dinerstein *et al.*, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Walston *et al.*, 2010).

On the other hand, there are former tiger range countries, such as Iran, Kazakhstan, and Korea, which have better financial resources. In recent years, genetic research has revealed that extinct Caspian and Korean tigers are genetically identical to Amur tigers (Driscoll *et al.*, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2012). Shortly after this discovery, those nations presented their interest in Amur tiger re-introduction and attempted to evaluate its feasibility in their territories (Driscoll *et al.*, 2012). However, it transpired that tiger reintroduction was impractical, considering the biological and social risk, and feasibility. If the re-introduction occurs, it will be a long-term, multi-billion-dollar project; it will cost much more money to bring tigers back to their former home than to protect existing populations in the current habitats. Moreover, the likelihood of a successful re-introduction is highly uncertain versus the possibility of securing the current population, possibly with less financial resources necessary. If nations wanted to join the global tiger conservation effort, the most effective way would be to provide financial and technical resources that the current tiger-range countries lack. However, indigent countries have been reluctant to support the ongoing conservation efforts. Instead, they want to see tigers in their own country regardless of the high cost and risk.

Discussion

Hence, nationalism ostensibly impedes current tiger conservation to some extent. However, it is hard to conclude that nationalism is always bad for tiger conservation. It has served an important role in bringing people’s attention to protect “the national pride” on a local or national scale among tiger range countries. Without appealing to people’s emotions, conserving this apex predator would be more difficult, especially since tigers occasionally damage property and can even kill or maim people.

Considering both the positive and negative aspects of

nationalism in tiger conservation, just like humans, tigers may need a passport for a better chance to survive.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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