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tiger

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forever



By JON MILLER

Illustrations

by

CRISTOPHER

CORR

Some time back I found myself living in Indonesia for a month while my wife set up a collaboration with an agricultural research institute there. Before I left the Philippines, my friend Tim, an Englishman who once worked in Borneo and who now studies rice diseases with my wife, told me about the elusive Javan rhinoceros, which roams a dense patch of jungle in a hard-to-get-to place in western Java. He hadn't heard much about these mysterious beasts except that they were extremely endangered and that scientists knew very little about them.

I decided to have a look, and quickly found myself knee-deep in the Javan mud with 28-year-old Canadian naturalist Vince Deschamps. Vince was working with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Ujung Kulon National Park, where part of his job was to help conduct a photo survey of the few remaining Javan rhinos. More than 20 cameras were hidden in the bush; the armour-plated behemoths were supposed to step on little pressure pads and take their own pictures, which would in turn provide vital information about their habits and numbers. Vince and I spent a few memorable days fighting off mosquitoes and each other's bad jokes. We didn't see any rhinos, but I ended up writing a meandering, philosophical article for *Discovery* ("Rhino!" April 1993) and getting a whopping case of malaria.

A year later I was facing a pile of work and bracing for the arrival of a second child when Vince sent a fax to me in Manila. The rhino study had gone well, he wrote; they had found 40 or 50 animals, and the population seemed to be thriving. Now Vince was headed for the opposite end of Java, where he would be setting up a photo survey — actually a photo trap — of the man-eating Javan tiger, which was even more endangered than the rhinoceros. There were none in zoos; in fact, no one was really sure whether there were any Javan tigers left at all. Would I like to come and do another jungle ramble? With the highly conditional approval of my wife (and a fistful of antimalarial pills) I decided to risk the trip. My friend Tim agreed to join the adventure.



Not long ago, three species of tiger lived and thrived in Indonesia. The Balinese tiger, confined to the lowland areas of Bali, was wiped out by the 1930s. The Sumatran tiger is still hanging on in small numbers in Sumatra, thanks in large part to an international effort to ensure its survival. The Javan tiger, however, has spent the last half century on the knife-edge of extinction. Prior to World War II, Javan tigers (*Panthera tigris sondaica*) could be found on the outskirts of Jakarta, Surabaya and other major urban centres. In 1862, 148 people were reported killed by the animals. But their ferocity was ultimately surpassed by their vulnerability. As Java's population quadrupled to 100 million, the tigers were forced into retreat. Their main problem was lack of space; a bounty hunting system didn't help. There have been no confirmed sightings in several years, but a single track was found in 1991 by a government expedition in Meru Betiri National Park, on Java's southeastern coast. Experts say that if there are any tigers left today, that is where they are, and so that is where Vince and the WWF chose to set up their cameras.

Our first stop in eastern Java

was at the forest conservation office in Jember, a bustling little city halfway between Surabaya (on the northeast coast) and Meru Betiri. There we asked Tri Wibowo, head of the office and a member of the last successful tracking survey, whether he thought there were any tigers left. The question provoked cascades of commentary, thoughtful silence, an unfurling of maps, nervous laughter, stern-faced pointing and earnest head-scratching. Vince translated: "There is more pressure every year, every day — people going into the park to collect leaves, to collect wood, to get food. But if you look at the condition of the park, and the amount of prey, and the large area, and the amount of forest — then you have to conclude that tigers could still live there." What's more, he added, when the foresters conducted a survey of ten local shamans, all ten emerged from their trances saying there were three tigers

roaming the park. I thought that sounded promising, and away we went. We arrived just before dark at the guesthouse at Sukamade, an old Dutch-era plantation within the park boundary (it still produces coffee, cocoa, rubber and sugar cane), and began preparing for a couple of days in the woods.

Everyone Tim and I talked to before leaving had advised us not to get eaten. We didn't take this advice very seriously until we were within sniffing distance of our quarry. What were our chances of making it out alive? I wondered. "I used to read about tigers when I was a child," Tim said helpfully. "The main thing I remember is that they would only resort to eating people if they were old or sick or injured. An old woman carrying water home from the well at dusk was a pretty easy target." I asked Vince if a tiger would venture into a populated plantation area, and he said yes. "They don't really mind people. They like low-lying, open country. In fact, most of the unconfirmed sightings in recent years have been by plantation workers. The last reported fatality happened back in 1961, when a couple of workers tried to rescue their rice pot from a tiger who had invaded their camp."

"How do the local people react when they see a tiger?" I asked. Vince smiled and told us about Mayar, the man who runs the sea turtle hatchery on Sukamade Beach, five kilometres from the plantation guesthouse. He was bicycling to work one morning when a tiger stepped onto the path. Mayar got off his bike, and both he and the tiger stood for a long time, staring at one another. Finally, growing impatient, the tiger began to make aggressive movements. So Mayar rang his bicycle bell. This upset the tiger more. But Mayar kept ringing the bell, and at last the tiger stood up on his hind legs, turned and retreated into the jungle.

The next morning, after traversing the vast plantation on foot, we ducked into the jungle ourselves. Vince reminded us that tigers were basically nocturnal animals, so our best chance to see one would be near our camp site at night. We were much more likely to see a leopard, he said, but in any case we were to be attentive to tracks and signs of feeding. Unlike leopards, he continued, tigers need an enormous territory to hunt in. Even if there were any left, the chances of coming across one in such a large area were minuscule. But he was hopeful that one of the nine cameras he had set up might give him a photographic glimpse. "All we're trying to do now is find out whether the tigers exist," he explained. "Nobody has said anything about what they plan to do once they find out."

Suddenly I wanted to know what I would do if I found out. I asked Vince for an honest assessment of our safety. "Don't worry about the tigers," he said reassuringly. "A leopard is actually more vicious. A tiger will jump on your back and kill you by breaking your neck. But a leopard will attack you straight on, grabbing your face in his jaws and tearing out your guts with the claws of his hind legs." I thanked him and for a long time we walked in silence.

That day we saw tracks of leopards, wild pigs and wild cattle. We also saw a spray of jungle fowl feathers, and I found the jawbone of a wild pig in a shallow stream. Clearly there was predation going on, but that didn't prove tigers. We

stopped at two remote camera locations, where Vince and his crew changed the film, checked the flash units and tinkered with the pressure pads. The survey had been going on for a couple of months, but no tigers had been captured yet on film, Vince said. They did have pictures of poachers, though — men with spears walking through the jungle at night. Since every tread on the pressure pad sets off the flash, it was clear that the men knew they were being photographed; in fact, it seemed from the way they were grinning towards the camera that they were getting their portraits taken on purpose. Vince said they were probably hunting wild pigs or other small game, but that didn't diminish the seriousness of their being there.

We established camp that afternoon by a swift little river. I found a superb bathing pool and the three of us lounged there and tried to put the day in perspective. "So," I asked Tim, "did you see any tigers?"

"I'd rather not say," he answered. "Did you?"

"Not that I can remember," I said, and turned to Vince. "How about you?"

"Tigers?" Vince asked, and closed his eyes and submerged himself in the water.

After failing to see any rhinos the year before, I was not holding out too much hope for this trip. But I knew the true test would come that night. I had a vivid image in my mind of a tiger gliding out of the forest to bathe in the river, and the three of us watching it resplendent and magnificent in the equatorial moonlight. Darkness fell and we sat on the ground eating dried fish and fiery soup. I had picked out a perfect tiger-viewing platform — a cluster of rocks in the middle of the stream — but it took all my powers of persuasion to get my two companions to join me there after dinner. I was lucky enough to find a bottle of whisky in my backpack, and we trudged with it out into the current. As we sat there in the jungle-noisy night, I asked Vince if tigers were considered special in Indonesia. Indeed they were, he said. "The Sundanese in West Java were very reluctant to kill tigers, because they thought they were the spirits of their ancestors," he said. This soul exchange apparently went both ways. Vince once witnessed a ceremony in a village in which female dancers hypnotized several men in the audience. The men were carried to the front, where a mystic said some magic words and transformed them into tigers. The men then got up and tore coconuts apart with their teeth — normally an impossible feat. Apparently mystics throughout Indonesia merge their spirits with those of tigers to heal sick patients. In some places, tigers are thought to be reincarnations of powerful men; in others, they are thought to be reincarnations of sinners.

It was then, with the three of us sitting on rocks in the dark



river, that I was overcome by a wave of intense sadness. I had been treating this whole adventure as a lark, when suddenly it struck me just how important a loss we were witnessing. I could think of no animal, no being so suited to life on earth as a wild tiger. A tiger is cunning, poised, majestic, athletic, terrifying, awesome. It is solitary and self-sufficient, it can decide whether to kill or not to kill. It possesses a mystery and a power that no person could ever possess. And it is disappearing. Forever.

We did not see any tigers that

night or the next day. We left the park and returned to Jakarta. Then Tim and I went on to Manila. Several months later, I called Vince to ask how things had turned out. "I think it's a no-go," he said. "We've got pictures of leopards, wild cattle, wild pigs, monitor lizards and a funny-looking kind of porcupine that hardly anybody else has photographed in the wild. But no tiger." I told him how disturbing I found this news, how bad it felt to watch helplessly as something so splendid vanished from the face of the earth. Vince paused. "To see such a beautiful species disappear, and to know it could have been prevented — it's frustrating," he said. "But you can't sit around and mope. You've got to ask what you can learn from it, what you can do to keep it from happening again." He then asked if I would join him in a year's time in Borneo, where he'd just landed a job seeking ways to protect orangutans and a host of other endangered animals. After a moment's reflection, I said I was sure I would. ☞

**Jon Miller is an American writer living in Manila.
Christopher Corr is an illustrator living in London.
Cathay Pacific flies daily to Jakarta.**