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Animal Profile: Endangered Cats

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Endangered Cats

At most zoos cats are the star attraction and the Philadelphia Zoo is no exception. Their family of Siberian tigers draws a crowd regularly.

Throughout the world there are seven subspecies of tigers. Of the seven the Caspian and the Bali are gone. Five remain: the Bengal, the Chinese, the Javan, the Siberian, and the Sumatran. The Bengal, with four to five thousand in the wild, is the most numerous species. Only 200 Siberian tigers live in their natural habitat. Zoos possess close to one thousand.

Panthera tigris altaica (Siberian tiger) is found in the Amur River region near the Soviet Far East and Northern China. The area consists of mixed deciduous forests and open, rocky, mountainous terrain. Siberian tigers are solitary hunters that depend greatly on their hearing. Often they detect their prey at a distance of over 500 meters. Wild boar and red deer are their preferred meal.

The largest of the felines, Siberians usually measure six and a half feet in length and have a three-foot tail. Their average weight is 350 pounds. During winter they develop a layer of fat as insulation that enables them to tolerate low temperatures.

The Siberian family at the Philadelphia Zoo has an interesting history. Kundar, the male, arrived as a cub from the Leipzig Zoo, where captive breeding has been extremely successful. He weighs over 600 pounds and is about thirteen years old. Tigers live about twelve to thirteen years in the wild. In captivity their life spans nearly double.

Kundar is no stranger to the University. A couple of years ago students from the School of Dental Medicine performed root canal surgery on Kundar and capped a few of his teeth as well!

Zeya, Kundar’s mate, arrived from the Milwaukee County Zoological Gardens on July 4, 1980. She gave birth to three female cubs. They were named Martha, Abigail, and Dolly in honor of the first three presidents’ wives. The girls live in separate cages near their parents. The Zoo also owns two Siberians currently at the Utica Zoo in New York.

Because of their grand size, beautiful color, and striping, Siberians are very popular in zoos. Their popularity has caused zoos to overbreed the species. Today there are more captive tigers than there are spaces available. Many zoos have stopped breeding and use a tiger version of birth control pills to prevent pregnancy.

Yet since captive tigers often live twice their normal life span, breeding may not occur until later than usual and a whole generation may be lost. The result is an unusual age distribution of cats. Also, most of the captive Siberians are descended from a relatively small gene pool resulting in a lack of genetic diversity in the animals.

The Species Survival Plan (SSP) is a controversial North American plan that provides strict guidelines for genetic purity in captive animals. In 1979 the International Union of Directors of Zoological Gardens met in Rotterdam. The Union asked Dr. Ulisse Seale, chairman of the Captive Breeding Specialists Group, to expand the North American plan for international use. If the SSP is adopted internationally, the structure of zoos will change dramatically. No longer will individual zookeepers make decisions concerning the breeding of animals. They will have to consult international guidelines.

The Philadelphia Zoo would be concerned mainly with the Operation Siberian Tiger phase of the SSP. Controversy over this plan seems imminent. To create the space needed for a large genetic diversity in captive tigers that corresponds to the genetic diversity found in wild tigers, many existing Siberians would have to be euthanized. In fact, some tigers today are so inbred that they too would not be kept.

Public reaction to the euthanization of animals is expected to be highly critical. Recently the Detroit Zoo tried to euthanize one of their old Siberians whose medical history was extremely poor. There was a tremendous public uproar.

If the Philadelphia Zoo subscribes to Operation Siberian Tiger, Bill Donaldson, a zoo spokesman, believes a public education campaign of the SSP will be imperative. Zoos must aid the preservation of animals and their genetic purity. According to Donaldson, the public needs to understand that without the SSP the captive Siberians of the future will be substantially different from their ancestors in the wild.