A market for tigers [1]

Written by **JP Floru** [2] | Thursday 21 January 2010

The Telegraph reports [3] that there are now fewer than 50 wild tigers left in China. We have banned the selling of tiger parts for many decades, yet tiger numbers continue to fall. The policy fails yet many persist in defending it. Tigers will only survive in the wild if we change our policy and trust the market.

Wild tiger extinction is demand driven. There is a huge demand for tiger parts in traditional Chinese medicine. Campaigns to reduce this thousand-year-old practice have failed. As there are fewer and fewer tigers, the price has gone up. Tigers live in poor countries. It is lucrative to risk being caught, and to bribe game wardens, officials and politicians. Because the price has sky-rocketed demand has gone up even further, as we see in the recent popularity of high-end tiger bone wine and tiger meat.

For decades environmental policies have focused on banning the tiger trade. This is doomed to failure, as the sky-rocketing price makes it impossible to police it. When trade is outlawed only the outlaws trade.

There is a market solution: the commercial farming of tigers. It is not difficult to farm tigers, and it is being done in many countries, including China and the USA. China has 5,000 captive tigers; the US 10,000. In fact these privately owned tigers may very well guarantee the survival of the species.

Economically and environmentally it makes total sense. The high demand is met by an increased offer. Therefore the market price for tigers goes down. If the price of a farmed tiger sinks below the price to poach one, poaching will disappear. In other words: farm tigers in captivity and tigers in the wild will be left in peace. It has been done before: widespread farming and internationally sanctioned trade rescued crocodiles from extinction.

The market can do even more for wild tigers, apart from farming them commercially. One fundamental problem with wild tigers (and wild animals in general), is that they are not owned by anyone. They are literally a free for all, which results in shortages, as is always the case where there is collective ownership. People are more protective of what they own privately than what they own collectively. Wild animals are greatly helped when their reserves are privatised. It can for example allow tourists to pay the cost of protecting the reserve. State owned tiger reserves bear a heavy responsibility for the killing of wild tigers.

The banning fails yet the environmental lobby persists in it. They rejoiced when CITES, the international organisation which regulates endangered species, misguidedly called for a phasing out of tiger farms in 2007. They attack the commercialism of farming, yet cannot come up with a rational alternative. They attack the cruelty of tiger farms, and perhaps rightly so, yet forget that we successfully ensure the welfare of many other farmed animals.

It's time for the environmental lobby to wake up, to realise the disastrous effect of its failed policy, and to use market mechanisms to achieve its goals.

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