

SOUTH CHINA TIGERS LOST IN THE AFRICAN WILDERNESS

By Liu Hongqiao

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The Free State province in the heartland of South Africa is a vast area of hot, flat plains, dry maize fields and big blue skies. It would seem an unlikely habitat for tigers, yet about 200 km from Bloemfontein, the provincial and national judicial capital, is the Laohu Valley Reserve, named after and home to the South China tiger, or *laohu* in Chinese.

A decade ago two South China tiger cubs were sent to the reserve from a Chinese zoo, and what began as an effort to save the species from the brink of extinction evolved into an ambitious ‘rewilding’ project with the goal of releasing the big cats back into their natural habitat. But while their numbers and hunting skills have grown in their temporary home, so far none have returned to China.

There are now fifteen South China tigers residing at Laohu Valley and according to tiger supervisor, Vivienne McKenzie, nine of them are already capable hunters.

“All the data we collected in Laohu Valley indicates that if the tigers can hunt here, they can hunt in China.”

University of Pretoria post-doctoral fellow Maria



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Fàbregas, who does ethological and reproductive research on the South China tiger, explains that though the landscape differs in the two countries, the vast plains and valleys in Laohu Valley actually provide less cover for the tigers than the forest landscape in southern China, making it an even more difficult place for hunting.

The South China tiger is exclusive to China and believed to be extinct in the wild. There are only about a hundred in the world outside of Laohu Valley, all in Chinese zoos.

In 2003 China's State Forestry Administration (SFA) partnered with environmental protection organisations, conservationists and wildlife specialists to propose a plan to send tiger cubs to South Africa. The goal was to release the tigers back into the wild and to restore the wild tiger population.

The original plan was to train the tigers in South Africa and return them to China in 2008, but the SFA has been unable to find a suitable place to release the rewilded tigers. They have now been in Africa five years longer than planned.

The financial backer and manager of Laohu Valley may now also be facing more challenges. Li Quan, a former fashion executive for Gucci and founder of Save China's Tigers, has filed for divorce from her husband, the

foundation's financial backer. The divorce is likely to put financial stress on the trust.

It may be time for the tigers to come home, but where in a badly deforested China can they go?

Cathay and Tiger Woods

The South China tiger is one of China's oldest tiger breeds and was very numerous in the past. Official statistics indicate that in 1949 there were still 4,000 of them in the wild. However, 50 to 60 years ago the tiger was declared a 'pest' by officials, opening it up to legal hunting. As a result over 3,000 were killed in a short space of time.

In the past 20 years not a single South China tiger has been observed in the wild. In 2007, a resident of Zhenping county in the northwestern province of Shaanxi, claimed to have photographed a wild South China tiger, but this was later proven to be a hoax. Experts now agree that the breed is extinct in the wild.

In 2009 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature named the South China tiger as the world's most endangered tiger subspecies. All the animals alive today are the zoo-bred progeny of six wild cats caught in the 1950s and 60s.

The idea to send the tigers to South Africa originated with Quan, a native of Beijing. In 1999, she spent time observing the successes of wildlife reserves and ecological tourism in Africa. A year later, Li and her husband, Stuart Bray, founded the Save China's Tigers Foundation in Britain. The foundation was later registered in the US as well as in Hong Kong.

In May 2002 the foundation purchased 30,000 hectares of land in South Africa as a base for rewilding South China tigers. The Chinese Tigers South African Trust was established to serve as the executive organisation for the rewilding project and to raise funds.

Later in 2002 representatives of the foundation, the trust and the SFA's National Wildlife Research and Development Centre met in Beijing to sign an agreement for breeding the species and reintroducing it into the wild, and that marked the formal launch of the project in South Africa.

Specialists from South Africa, the US, Japan, Brazil and many other nations lent great support to the project. In 2003, an executive team comprised of leading South African wildlife specialists and conservationists began planning the layout of Laohu Valley and methods for rewilding the tigers.

In September 2003 two tiger cubs – Cathay and Hope – arrived in South Africa, making them the first South China tigers on the African continent. A year later cubs named Tiger Woods and Madonna were also flown to the reserve. Then in 2007 an adult tiger, ‘No. 327’, was sent from a zoo in Suzhou in the eastern province of Jiangsu, in order to start the breeding program.

Raising a tiger is hard, but teaching it to live in the wild is even harder. Over the next decade, more tigers were bred from the first arrivals, but there were misfortunes too, No. 327 died in a fight. Hope and three more cubs also died.

Where is home?

The agreement signed in 2002 stipulated the reintroduction of the tigers into the wild in China by 2008. That deadline came and went, but the tigers remained abroad. There is still no confirmed date for their return.

From 2003 to 2004, with approval from the SFA, members of the foundation and the wildlife centre brought together Chinese and international experts to evaluate seven candidate sites around the country. In January 2004, experts from China and South Africa suggested after field studies that it was feasible to reintroduce the tigers into conservation areas.

Eventually Zixi county, in the eastern province of Jiangxi, and Liuyang city, in the central province of Hunan, were picked. (‘City’ here is a level of government, and such designations in China often include large rural areas.) These two areas, experts said, not only satisfied the requirements of the tigers for habitation and breeding in the wild, but also had good prospects for environmental tourism.

The SFA issued notices to the provincial forestry bureaus of Jiangxi and Hunan in 2006, establishing an area in northern Zixi and the Zhushuqiao region of Liuyang as reintroduction sites.

But reintroducing the tigers to these areas has proven much more difficult than anticipated. The relocation of the human populations in these areas, both in excess of one thousand people, would require approval from the State Council, China’s cabinet. The land in these regions is currently designated as ‘agricultural’, and changing this status would require approval from the Ministry of Land and Resources. So in the end, the animals did not move.

The SFA again organised a panel to choose a site in China in 2010, and three sites were picked: Wufeng

Houhe nature reserve zone, in the central province of Hubei; Matou Mountain, again in Jiangxi’s Zixi county; and Huping Mountain, in Shimen county in the central province of Hunan. The document also suggested that the Meihuashan South China tiger breeding center in Fujian province in the east could be expanded for rewilding and rejuvenation of the new tiger population.

Three more years have passed, but the central government still has not signed off on the three sites. The reason for the delay is unclear, but even if officials do finally give their permission, three to five years would be needed to prepare the sites.

Even if fees paid to experts and the costs of relocating human populations are excluded, preparing a suitable habitat is expensive. Brad Nilson, who advises an investment company under the Laohu Valley Reserve trust, says the organisation has budgeted 180 million yuan for the preparation of a tiger reintroduction zone.

Lu Jun, director of the SFA’s wildlife research centre, says the majority of the tiger’s former habitat are regions that have been highly developed.

“Restoring a suitable habitat for the survival of the South China tiger is not something you can do just by talking about it,” Lu says. “It’s already a much more complicated proposition than originally anticipated, so progress on the project is proceeding much more slowly than originally anticipated.”

Lu says that renovations to the Meihuashan breeding centre are set for completion in early 2014; it will be a rewilding training and population rejuvenation centre based on the Laohu Valley model.

“Meihuashan already has the basic conditions required for the return of the tigers,” Lu says. “The South China tigers that come back from South Africa will be given appropriate training in Meihuashan.”

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The wrong tiger?

In the spring of 2003, before any Chinese tigers ever travelled to Africa, a group under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature that specialises in wild cats expressed reservations about the Save China's Tigers Foundation's plans to rewild tigers in South Africa.

The group includes over 100 cat specialists and wildlife conservationists from around the world, and is widely considered to be one of the world's most authoritative independent research organisations in its field.

The group felt that experience has proven that all reintroduction projects are risky, and the animals' familiarity with their habitat and local game stocks are important factors behind population restoration. In addition, the degree of inbreeding in domestically raised South China tigers is exceptionally high, meaning there was only a limited chance for the survival of a sustainable, diverse wild population.

Lu says that the efforts to save the tigers "have already far exceeded the scope for saving any species, and won't be a simple matter of relying on science and technology alone."

The director of the World Wildlife Fund's China Species Program, Fan Zhiyong, also has doubts. A single South China tiger could range over 50 square kilometres, but such a suitable area would be difficult to find in southern China now. Fan also says that Africa's game populations are dense, but China's no longer are.

This naturally raises questions as to whether the foundation would ever find the space and food in China for the tigers to thrive again.

Another point of contention in expert circles concerns whether the genetic makeup of South China tigers rewilded in South Africa is pure. Xie Yan, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Zoology, says the significance of saving the South China tiger lies in saving its genes.

"When we test individual South China tigers that have recently been bred, their genes do not truly represent the subspecies. A lot of genetic material from the Indochinese tiger has gotten mixed in. So the genetic significance of breeding these individuals to preserve the distinctive heredity of the South China tiger is another question mark."



There is still no confirmed date for the South China tigers' return to China.

Some at the international conservation union say China might be better off trying to save the four subspecies of tiger that remain in the country. According to Xie, the Amur tiger, also known as the Siberian tiger, native to north-eastern China and Siberia, is not yet extinct in the wild. The wild population still has healthy numbers, she says, meaning there is still time to build conservation areas on the Sino-Russian border.