



# WILDLIFE VETS INTERNATIONAL

## The Sumatran Tiger Health Forum - Update April 2015

### Introduction

The suspicion that Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) may be causing disease in wild Sumatran tigers as it has in other tiger range states led to an initiative by WVI in September 2013 to establish an Indonesian organisation that would identify significant endemic and emerging diseases in wild Sumatran tigers across the island. This organisation is known as the "Sumatran Tiger Health Forum" or STHF, and WVI is committed to providing technical support and assistance in its formative years.

*See previous reports:*

*Sumatran Tiger Disease Surveillance - September 3-5, 2013*

*Sumatran Tiger Disease Surveillance - March 22-24, 2014*

Unfortunately, progress by the STHF towards achieving its' goals soon became severely limited due to the unexpected illness of the forum's chair Dr Retno Sudarwati of Taman Safari, Indonesia. Tragically, Dr Retno died early in April 2014, and the activities of the STHF were effectively suspended.

The loss of Dr Retno to the STHF and tiger conservation in general was a sad and significant one, but ambitious projects like the development of disease surveillance programmes for wild tiger populations inevitably experience setbacks. It is the response to such situations that is important. WVI takes a long term view and will assist in overcoming such difficulties as and when they arise. The need for the STHF is not diminished, and neither is our commitment to the project. Furthermore, Taman Safari Indonesia remains solidly supportive of the STHF and there is no reason why the forum shouldn't evolve into a valuable organisation serving the needs of tiger conservation in years to come.



Male Sumatran tiger

### **Picking up the threads.....**

In order to facilitate re-invigoration of the STHF following this tragedy, Dr John Lewis of WVI re-visited Indonesia in April 2015 to discuss the way forward with a number of key stakeholders. During this trip Dr Lewis was accompanied by Dr Martin Gilbert of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) with which WVI is developing a close association due to mutual interests in tiger conservation.

Meetings were held with the following organisations and individuals:

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Taman Safari Indonesia:</b>      | A key sponsor and supporter of the STHF  |
| <b>ZSL - Indonesia:</b>             | Conservation NGO active in tiger conservation on Sumatra   |
| <b>Bogor Primate Center (PSSP):</b> | The most professional and capable diagnostic veterinary laboratory in Indonesia, and part of the Bogor University. |
| <b>Dr Kholis of WCS Indonesia:</b>  | Secretary of Harimau Kita (the Sumatran Tiger Conservation Forum)  |

The outcome of these meetings can be summarised as follows:

- The importance of, and interest in, disease surveillance for wild Sumatran tigers is still recognised and supported by all stakeholders consulted.
- The directors of Taman Safari (Messrs Tony & Jansen Semanpau) remain supportive of the STHF and will assist in efforts to seek a way forward.
- Potential candidates for the role of chair/coordinator of the STHF were discussed. One strong possibility is that Dr Kholis could manage the task. This is currently being considered & discussed between Dr Kholis and WCS.
- The STHF needs to be a legally recognised body. This could be achieved by embedding it within Harimau Kita (already a legal entity). Other options are being considered.
- A larger meeting of the STHF members will be required in Autumn 2015 to confirm suggestions on the way forward. Dr Lewis will attend.
- The PSSP has an impressive range of diagnostic capabilities suitable for investigation of tiger samples. They also have exceptional high quality long-term storage facilities for samples. With a little help, it is possible that PSSP will be able to conduct tests that were previously thought only available outside of Indonesia (notably tests relating to CDV surveillance). Given the considerable difficulties in exporting tiger samples from Indonesia this is a significant advance.
- The vets at Taman Safari (all members of the STHF) have been quietly active during the preceding year identifying existing samples taken from wild and captive tigers at Taman Safari, Tambling, and other facilities. This was one of the first objectives of the forum.
- Other samples from wild and captive tigers have been located at PSSP held in long term deep freeze.
- The Country Manager of ZSL Indonesia (Anjar Rafiastanto) expressed a keen desire to contribute to tiger disease surveillance, incorporating a health component into their tiger-related activities in the future and possibly employing an Indonesian vet for the purpose. Mr Rafiastanto also understood the dangers of not conducting disease risk analyses in proposed tiger corridors - or zones of connectivity.

Progress towards re-establishing an active Sumatran tiger disease surveillance framework in Indonesia was undoubtedly made. We do not expect this to be easy or quick, but with continued involvement and support from WVI we believe it can be achieved, and therefore this programme remains one of our top priority activities.

### **Our sponsors**

None of the activities detailed above would have been possible without the generous support of our supporters. We are enormously grateful to the following organisations:

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Tiger**  
**BIAZA Mammal Working Group**  
**Colchester Zoo's Action for the Wild programme**  
**Etihad Airways**  
**Friends of Paradise Wildlife Park**  
**Shepreth Wildlife Conservation Charity**  
**Wildlife Heritage Foundation**



Wild Sumatran tigress - Kerinci National Park - WCS camera trap