

Wildlife Vets International

Amur tiger rehabilitation and Amur leopard reintroduction – A progress report

Dr John Lewis made yet another short trip to the Russian Far East in January 2017 to discuss how WVI can further assist the Alexeevka tiger and leopard rehabilitation centre, and to meet with key players in the leopard reintroduction programme. On this trip he was hosted by the Primorsky State Agricultural Academy in Ussurisk and Misha Gonchuruk & Linda Kerley of ZSL.

The Alexeevka rehabilitation centre

The rehabilitation of orphaned or injured individuals of common species generally has little to do with conservation. However, with animals as rare as the Amur tiger and Amur leopard, every individual is important and rehabilitation becomes a necessary tool on occasions.

A centre for the purpose has been established over the past few years at Alexeevka, situated south-east of Ussurisk in the Russian Far East. It is currently run by Victor Gapanov, Katia Blidchenko and others who work in very demanding conditions to help orphaned, injured and sick Amur tigers, Amur leopards and bears return to a life in the wild. It was designed to minimise unnecessary contact with humans during an animal's captivity, and consists of simple quarantine and intensive care housing, and large, fenced outdoor enclosures. Once through quarantine and any necessary veterinary treatments, animals are moved to the outdoor pens and managed in a largely hands-off manner. Monitoring of animals' progress in all areas is achieved as far as possible through numerous remote cameras rather than direct observation. CCTV is also employed to assess locomotion and hunting ability of the cats as they progress towards their release. Russian vets Misha Gonchuruk (ZSL) and Misha Alshinetski (Moscow Zoo) are the centre's in-country vet advisors.

Alexeevka has achieved some excellent results to date, and WVI has already been helping by providing veterinary advice via emails through a grant from the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Of course our input is always in consultation with the Russian vets. However, to maximise our value to the centre, it was felt necessary to see the facilities and appreciate the veterinary problems at first hand, and have detailed discussions with Victor Gapanov and Katia Blidchenko on site. WVI was also able to provide some veterinary equipment for the centre. As a result WVI will continue its remote support when needed, and make occasional visits to the centre as necessary. We feel that we now have a far better working knowledge of the centre's issues and can therefore make a more significant contribution to this important facility.



A young tiger cub suffering from severe wounds to the head (possibly inflicted by another tiger) was admitted to Alexeevka the day before John Lewis's visit (see picture below). A considerable amount of time was spent in getting the animal over its initial problems, and in the subsequent couple of months we are delighted to report that it has made good progress and is now (mid-march 2017) in an outside enclosure with a similar-aged, orphaned female tiger cub. It remains to be seen whether this one will be able to return to the wild, but it is certainly a good start for an animal that was undoubtedly at death's door on arrival!



Outdoor enclosures at Alexeevka



Young tiger cub with head injuries

Amur leopard reintroduction update

The original plan for reintroducing Amur leopard involved moving breeding leopards from the European zoos' breeding programme (EEP) to a breeding and release centre in the Lazovsky Zapovednik in south-east Primorsky. There is little doubt that Lazovsky is the best release site, and the EEP (to which John Lewis is the veterinary advisor) remains ready to provide breeding leopards for the programme. However, there is some current debate in Russia about the site at which leopards will be bred following recent suggestions of alternatives.

John Lewis visited the director of the Lazovsky Zapovednik (Vladimir Aramilev) to discuss the situation and have a look at the site allocated to developing the breeding and release centre there. Dr Aramilev is keen to continue with the original plan, and there is certainly suitable habitat to build the centre.

John also visited the director of "Land of the Leopard" national park^{*}, Dr Tatiana Baranovskaya, who has suggested that a breeding centre could be situated in that area instead of at Lazovsky. During the discussions it became clear that Land of the Leopard certainly has access to suitably remote habitat for the purpose, and is extremely keen to be a part of the project. A disease risk analysis of the site would be necessary before we could endorse this plan.

A third alternative proposal has now been suggested within the EEP – that of breeding leopards within northern European zoos in areas from which the public are excluded, followed by export to Lazovsky. This is at least feasible, if not ideal.

In all cases, leopards bred for release would have to undergo a period of adaptation at Lazovsky before release, during which their hunting abilities and attitudes to people will need to be assessed. For a variety of reasons, each proposal has advantages and disadvantages, and WVI's current position on the issue is that these alternative plans are not mutually exclusive. If done to a high standard they could all contribute to the reintroduction. To establish a second wild population in a reasonable time frame it will be necessary to breed as many leopards for release as quickly as possible, and conceivably all three breeding scenarios could contribute to the success of reintroduction.

^{*}"Land of the Leopard" is the largest protected area for the existing wild Amur leopard population and is located in south west Primorsky.



A wild Amur leopard – picture by Michiel Hotte