Tigers Coexist With People as Creatures of the Night

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Tigers in and around Chitwan National Park, Nepal, are becoming active at night in order to share the space with humans, according to a new U.S.-Nepali study.

The global wild tiger population has dropped by 97 percent in the last century to about 3,000, with many of the remaining tigers being limited to small areas they have to share with humans.

"As our planet becomes more crowded, we need to find creative solutions that consider both human and natural systems," said research team leader Jianguo Liu at Michigan State University (MSU) in a press release. "Sustainability can be achieved if we have a good understanding of the complicated connections between both worlds.

A tiger camera trapped in Chitwan National Forest in Nepal. (Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability, Michigan State University)

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"We've found something very interesting is happening in Nepal that holds promise for both humans and nature to thrive."

Using motion-sensing cameras, the scientists studied the 121 tigers living in the park, and the people who utilize the trails to access resources like wood. The roads are also patrolled by soldiers to prevent poaching.

Analysis of the images showed that people and tigers follow the same tracks but at different times, with tigers typically using them at night when people tend to avoid the forest.

At Chitwan, there is plenty of food for tigers, and poaching of the cats and their prey is fairly low. Despite an increasing number of people in the area, the tiger population seems to be stable.

"If we operate under the traditional wisdom that tigers only can survive with space dedicated only for them, there would always be conflict," said researcher Neil Carter, also at MSU, in the release. "Tigers need to use the same space as people if they are to have a viable long-term future."

"What we're learning in Chitwan is that tigers seem to be adapting to make it work," he added. Tigers are normally active at all times of the day, but at Chitwan they have become nocturnal.

A compromise seems to be possible: tigers can be protected while people can still use the forest.

"If that’s the case, then this can happen in other places, and the future of tigers is much brighter than it would be otherwise."

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