

# Roadmap to Closing Captive Tiger Facilities of Concern



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# THE PROBLEM

A “captive tiger facility of concern,” for the purposes of this document, is a facility that keeps or breeds tigers in captivity with an intent (or reasonable probability) of supplying or directly engaging in the commercial trade in tigers and/or their body parts or derivatives. The application of this definition is not limited by the stated purpose of such facilities. See Appendix 1 for further details on attributes which may indicate a facility is of concern.

At least

**8,900**

captive tigers  
are estimated to be held in  
East and Southeast Asia



Current estimates indicate that there are at least 8,900 tigers being held in more than 300 facilities in East and Southeast Asia. Over 6,000 of these tigers are located in China<sup>1</sup>, with the remaining animals found almost exclusively in Thailand (approx. 1,635)<sup>2</sup>, Lao PDR (451)<sup>3</sup>; and Vietnam (395)<sup>4</sup>. These numbers are estimates based on the best available information and, particularly in Southeast Asia, can rapidly shift. The rate at which tigers

are bred, traded from one facility to another, and slaughtered for illegal trade is not known but is believed to be high, accounting for the rapid shifts in captive tiger estimates. Additionally, there are significant concerns around captive tiger facilities and their role in the tiger trade in Myanmar, South Africa, and some EU Member States, as well as the large captive tiger population in the United States.

There is huge size variation across these facilities of concern, from the very small (one or a few individuals) to huge operations containing more than 1,000 tigers. Although these facilities, often referred to as “tiger farms,” have been around since at least 1986, the number of captive tigers has spiked considerably during the last 15 years, highlighting the need to stop the breeding of these tigers before the problems of monitoring, control, care and involvement in trade gets even more difficult to manage.

Tiger farming represents a significant animal welfare problem, with issues including indiscriminate breeding, crowding, inappropriate housing systems, genetic abnormalities causing acute suffering, cruel practices perpetuated in order to better control animals, inhumane slaughtering practices, poor diet, and early removal of cubs from mothers.

From a conservation perspective, the operation and scale of these captive tiger facilities of concern are a significant obstacle to the protection and recovery of wild tiger populations, as it allows for two highly negative pressures on the species to persist as they:

- undermine enforcement efforts: the movement (or leakage) of tiger products (including whole tigers, parts or derivatives) from such facilities to consumer markets complicates and thus undermines enforcement efforts aimed at stopping the trade in tiger products.
- help perpetuate (and grow) demand: The availability of any tiger products from captive tiger facilities serves to legitimise and normalise demand for such items. Given the high cost of raising tigers in captivity, these facilities have a vested interest in promoting demand for their products, whether by putting pressure on governments to allow their sale or by exploiting buyers who are unaware of the law or willing to ignore it. Given consumers' preference for wild sourced tiger parts and products, even a modest expansion in the demand for tiger products could increase poaching pressures on wild populations.

1 CITES / Species 360 (2018) Review of facilities keeping Asian big cats (*Felidae* spp.) in captivity, CITES SC70 Doc. 51 Annex 2 (Rev. 1) <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/70/E-SC70-51-A2-R1.pdf>

2 Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand (2023) pers comms

3 Lao PDR response to CITES questionnaire (2022) CITES SC75 Doc. 9, Annex 1 <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/SC/75/agenda/E-SC75-09.pdf>

4 Education for Nature Vietnam (August 2023) pers comms

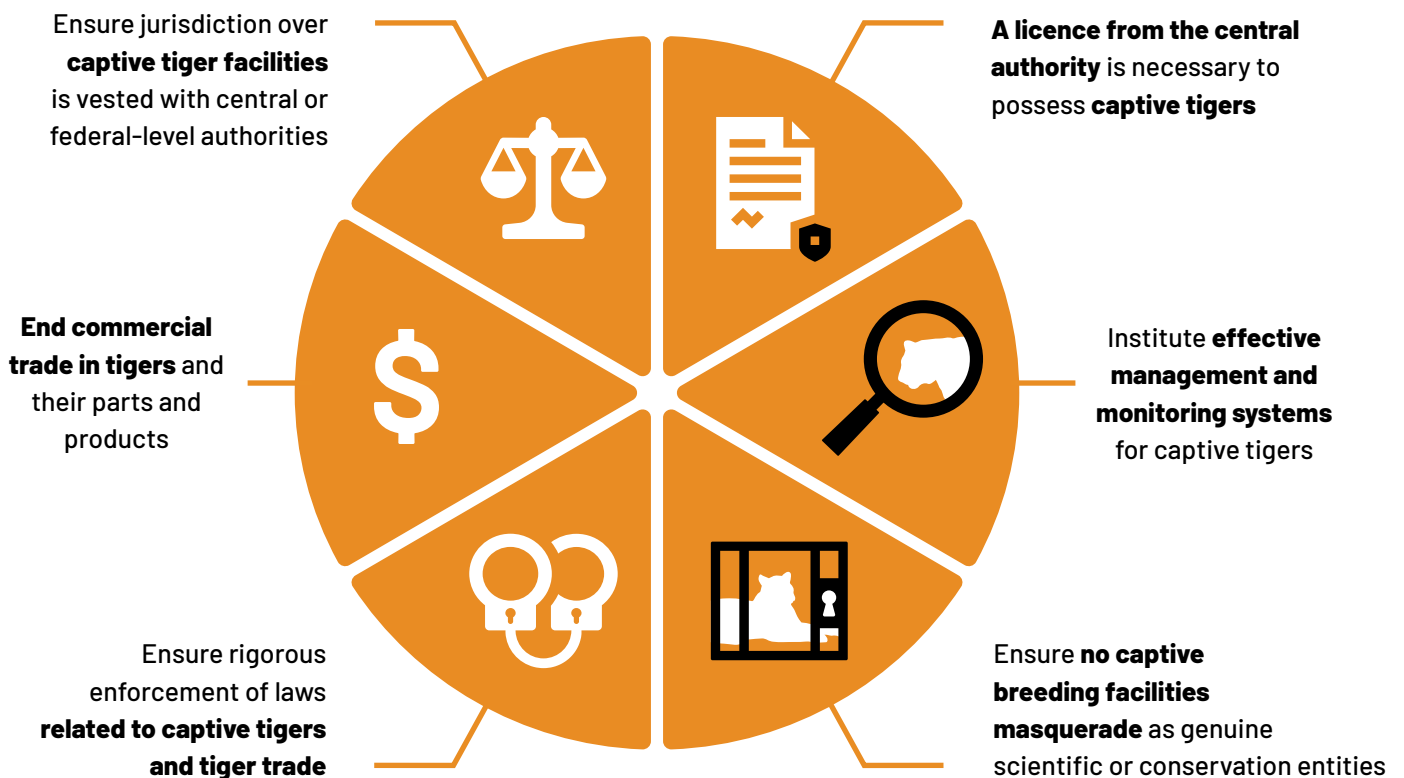
# SOLUTIONS

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has agreed recommendations in relation to the keeping and breeding of tigers and other Asian big cats in captive facilities. See Appendix 2 for further details.

Given the illegal activities and conservation problems attributed to such operations, we recommend that States phase out captive tiger facilities of concern, whilst preventing the creation or growth of further such facilities. Even before phase-out plans are developed and undertaken, all States with captive tiger facilities of concern are required by CITES to have in place controls and management of such facilities.

1.

## IMMEDIATE CONTROL AND MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS



All States with captive tiger facilities of concern should immediately fully implement these controls and management mechanisms:

- I) **Ensure jurisdiction over captive tiger facilities is vested with central or federal-level authorities** so it is possible for the below points to be implemented in a consistent and efficient manner across jurisdictions; and to also ensure the national government can better fulfil its obligations under international agreements such as CITES.
- II) **A licence from the central authority is necessary to possess captive tigers.** Possession of tigers without such a registration / licence should be an offence. Breeding in any captive facility should only be allowed where this contributes to conservation (see Appendix 3 for further details).
- III) **End commercial trade in tigers**, from any source including wild and captive, by introducing and maintaining laws which prohibit commercial trade in all live tigers, and tiger parts and products, and/or closing existing legal loopholes that enable trade. These bans would also serve to remove legal trade as the main economic incentive for captive breeding.
- IV) **Institute effective management and monitoring systems for captive tigers**, including increased transparency in the operations of existing captive tiger facilities and incorporating mechanisms to make all pertinent details regarding the tigers held at these facilities available to the public. Such details should include:
  - A. the correct taxonomic identification and scientific name
  - B. any distinctive identifiers, including microchips linked to unique DNA and stripe pattern identifiers
  - C. birth information including date and location (i.e., whether wild or captive born)
  - D. the lineage of the animal (which would indicate hybridisation and inbreeding)
  - E. the rearing of the animal (where known)
  - F. the sex of the animals (where known)
  - G. any contraception administration, whether temporary or permanent
  - H. the verified date and circumstances pertaining to the death, post-mortem examination and disposal of the specimen/carcass, including the verification authority
  - I. the date and details of any escapes, or any damage or injury caused to, or by, an animal to persons or property
  - J. the date and locations involved in the movement and/or storage of specimens (live or dead, including all parts and derivatives)

Protocols for the destruction of carcasses should be in place to allow independent verification of deceased specimens, e.g. video recorded and in the presence of a wildlife authority.

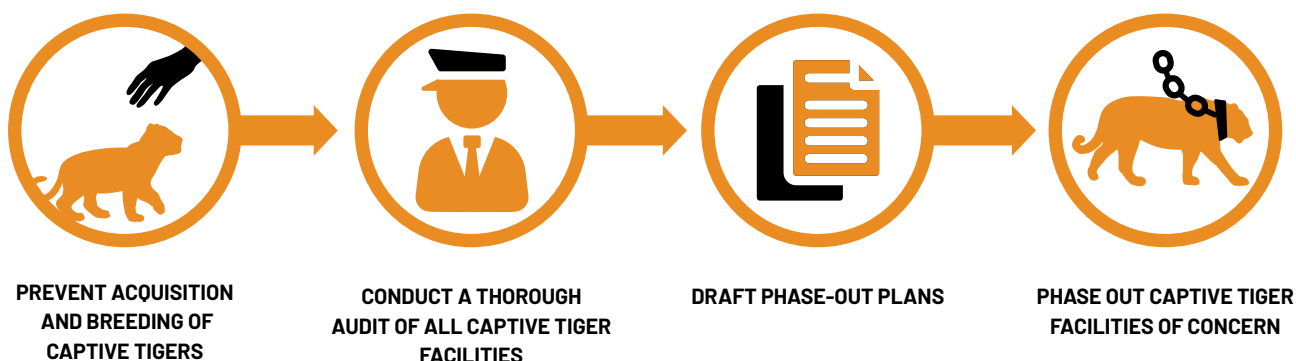
Monitoring should include frequent and unannounced inspections by relevant authorities to confirm presence of all registered tigers and to detect presence of unregistered tigers. The status and results of these efforts should also be reported back as an element of a country's international commitment to CITES, including relevant Resolutions and Decisions. Currently, the lack of such transparency allows for the possibility of unlawful activity.

- V) Ensure rigorous enforcement of laws prohibiting the possession of tigers of illegal origin or without registration, and the illegal trade in tigers and their parts and products.** It is essential that such enforcement measures ensure that wild tigers and their products are not laundered through captive breeding facilities. Unregistered tigers should be considered illegal and confiscated by authorities in order to prevent new tigers from entering into tiger facilities of concern. Confiscated tigers may only be registered by a legitimate rescue centre/sanctuary/ zoo (see section 3(i) below for definition).

Efforts must be supported by a national database holding data on microchip numbers linked to photographs of stripe patterns and DNA from all captive tigers, regular monitoring of market availability (including e-commerce and social media groups) and well-publicised enforcement action by State authorities.

- VI) Ensure no captive breeding facilities established primarily for commercial purposes masquerade as genuine scientific or conservation entities** in order to exploit loopholes in existing law or to receive any other undue benefits.

## 2. PLANNING FOR PHASE OUT



National phase-out plans will differ in the context of the scope, nature and scale of the facilities, legal and cultural frameworks, and viable solutions. We recommend that States with captive tiger facilities of concern should:

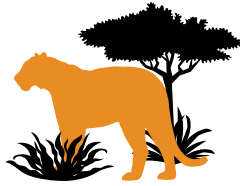
- I) **Take actions to immediately prevent continued acquisition and breeding of captive tigers** for non-conservation purposes, including a legal moratorium. This can be started immediately by segregation of the animals so that males do not have access to females. Should space/infrastructure prove restrictive, sterilisation and/or contraceptive implants can be utilised, after which animals can be allowed together again.
- II) **Conduct a thorough audit of all captive tiger facilities** within their jurisdiction and individual tigers within them. All individual tigers should be registered on a national database including microchip numbers linked to photographs of stripe patterns and DNA;
- III) **Draft phase-out plans** for tiger captive facilities of concern involving relevant government authorities, in consultation with, and with technical support from, appropriate local and international experts in veterinary care, animal husbandry and welfare, the use of DNA and tiger stripe pattern identification, and conservation;
- IV) **Put in place a clear timeline** to phase out existing captive tiger facilities of concern.

Parallel to these phase-out steps, there is a critical need for governments, donors and NGOs to **develop and implement effective social and behavioural change (SBC) approaches to reduce consumer demand for tigers, and their parts and products**, using evidence from consumer surveys, and marketing and SBC expertise. Such demand reduction efforts are essential to ensure that eliminating the supply from captive sources to trade does not shift pressure to increase poaching in the wild.



# 3.

## SOLUTIONS FOR CONFISCATED AND TRANSFERRED TIGERS



**TRANSFER TO LEGITIMATE SANCTUARIES AND ZOOS**



**MAINTAINING TIGERS IN EXISTING FACILITIES UNTIL NATURAL DEATH**



**EUTHANASIA**

### I) TRANSFER TO LEGITIMATE SANCTUARIES AND LEGITIMATE ZOOS

Existing capacity in current sanctuaries and zoos cannot accommodate all the tigers from captive tiger facilities of concern if all of these tigers were transferred or confiscated at the same time. However, it is unrealistic to think that this will happen. As captive tiger facilities of concern are phased out they will yield a greater number of tiger transfers than currently occur, for example from confiscations and voluntary closure, but these transfers would occur over time, not at once. Where individual tigers are to be transferred to legitimate sanctuaries or zoos the [IUCN Guidelines for the Placement of Confiscated Animals](#)<sup>5</sup> should be followed.

To understand available capacity within captive tiger facilities not of concern, a national sanctuary and zoo availability index could be established by the government, NGOs and/or legitimate sanctuaries and zoos as appropriate, depending on the local context. This would show the carrying capacity and intended expansion aims of sanctuaries and zoos at a national level that can accommodate tigers from within and/or outside the country.

For the purposes of this document, a legitimate sanctuary or legitimate zoo, whether government run or privately run, is considered to be a facility providing temporary or permanent care to animals, guided by the following principles:

- providing excellent and humane care for their animals, following strictly established welfare criteria;
- if allowing visitors, this is not for the purposes of petting, selfies, or other interaction with the animals or live performances;
- having policies in place regarding ethical visitor tours, exhibition, acquisition and disposal;
- prohibiting all buying and selling of tigers and their parts and derivatives;
- prohibiting all breeding of tigers with the narrow exception of zoos contributing to conservation breeding (see Appendix 3), as part of an established, science-based population management program, such as those following IUCN Guidelines on the [Use of Ex Situ Management for Species Conservation](#)<sup>6</sup>.
- providing lifetime care or, if transferring to another facility, the receiving facility must also meet the above criteria.

In order to accommodate increased numbers of tiger transfers, it may be necessary to build or expand facilities that meet the above criteria. An availability index could illustrate the needs, and opportunities, which can be supported through partnership discussion and funding.

## **II) MAINTAINING TIGERS IN EXISTING FACILITIES UNTIL NATURAL DEATH**

In some instances, where re-homing options are not available to legitimate sanctuaries or zoos, the tigers may have to remain in the existing facility of concern until such time as they are naturally deceased. Importantly, where illegal activities have occurred the facility's ownership must be transferred to the government or to a sanctuary organisation or zoo and they must improve conditions to meet the requirements above for a legitimate sanctuary or zoo and fully deliver the controls and management mechanisms above.

As a least preferred option, where the government or a sanctuary or zoo organisation cannot acquire ownership and management of the facility, other responsible ownership can be considered so long as the requirements in the previous section, especially halting any breeding and further acquisition of tigers, are fully implemented and monitored.

A captive tiger can live up to 20 years. As there would be no breeding allowed in this approach (and sterilisation strongly recommended), the number of captive tigers will decrease naturally without requiring extra sanctuary capacity to be created.

## **III) EUTHANASIA**

Euthanasia is the humane ending of an animal's life for the intention of preventing further suffering of an animal. Where it is not possible for a captive tiger to be placed in a legitimate zoo or sanctuary, where the existing facility is not able to meet established criteria, or because of health reasons, then euthanasia may be recommended, with appropriate record keeping and disposal of carcasses. An external (independent) veterinarian should conduct assessments of each tiger to identify individuals which are suffering from poor health/illness/injury to determine if euthanasia is the most humane course of action. The ethical and cultural implications of euthanasia should be considered.

### **Note of caution**

Introduction of tigers from facilities of concern directly to the wild should not be considered a viable solution in any phase-out plan, as the animals would not survive for long before human or livestock attacks would result, with consequential retaliatory killings or necessary capture and/or euthanasia.

5 IUCN Guidelines for the Placement of Confiscated Animals  
<https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2002-004.pdf>

6 IUCN Guidelines on the Use of Ex Situ Management for Species Conservation  
<https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/44952>



# FUNDING

Governments are encouraged to work with facility owners/operators, NGOs, and animal husbandry and other relevant experts to understand the expected costs of complete phase-out and identify sources of financing.

It is recommended that compensation not be given to the owners of captive tiger facilities of concern that are phased out.

Some have been involved in illegal activities and/or continued or even grew their captive populations knowing that this created a financial burden which could not be legally met. Additionally, a compensation package could potentially be a financial incentive that could encourage further breeding of tigers.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 Attributes indicating captive tiger facilities of concern

If a country does not satisfy paragraph 1.h) of CITES Res. Conf. 12.5 (Rev. CoP19) (see Appendix 2), and there is evidence of illegal trade of tiger specimens in the country and / or the country permits any legal commercial trade in tigers, and their parts or derivatives, the recommended approach would be to consider that every facility keeping tigers in their jurisdiction is a facility of concern.

Most importantly, in addition to this context at a country level, **any facility involved in the legal or illegal commercial trade of tigers or their parts and products should be considered a facility of concern.** This includes products sold on site which are explicitly or implicitly marketed to contain tiger parts and derivatives as ingredients (i.e. “special bone wine”, “tiger bone glue”, teeth, claws, bones, skins).

Facilities which are clearly: i) bona fide rescue centres / sanctuaries; or ii) part of an established, science-based population management program (see Section 3(i)), can be excluded from the list of facilities of concern.

The following are an illustrative list of attributes that may indicate that a facility is of concern:

**1** There is no clear articulation of the primary purpose of the facility (i.e., whether it is conservation oriented);

**2** The facility is not open to the public;

**3** The facility’s operations are not financially feasible, for example if the facility claims it is a zoo, it should be evident that the ticket prices and ticket sales volumes are sufficient to cover costs;

**4** The facility has affiliated businesses such as other facilities keeping tigers, wineries, taxidermy, bone glue processing, restaurants, supply of big cat parts and products for retail or wholesale purposes or to hospitals, etc.;

**5** The facility keeps, breeds or sells other wild faunal species for commercial purposes;

**6** The facility does not have a reliable system for record keeping, data management or reporting;

**7** There is insufficient security in terms of transport of live animals, and storage and disposal of deceased specimens;

**8** There is no reliable marking and identification system (eg. DNA, stripe pattern) in place to monitor individual specimens during their lifetime (birth, death, transfer, sale, disposal);

**9** There are multiple cubbing dens present;

**10** Male and female tigers are not separated or sterilised when not part of an established, science-based population management program;

**11** Tigers are kept in unnatural groups (either large groups or mixed species) or exhibit unnatural behaviours;

**12** Tigers are habituated to people, or handled or drugged unnecessarily by staff;

**13** Direct contact is allowed between tigers and visitors, including for photos;

**14** The facility is located in a remote area or close to known trafficking routes and hotspots;

**15** The facility stockpiles tiger parts and derivatives;

**16** The facility has inadequate veterinary care and welfare standards;

**17** Healthy claws or teeth are removed from tigers.

## APPENDIX 2 Operative CITES recommendations related to the keeping of captive tigers

Paragraph 1.h) of Res. Conf. 12.5 (Rev. CoP19)<sup>7</sup> recommends that any country which has facilities keeping Asian big cats in captivity should ensure:

- A) that it has adequate management practices and controls to prevent Asian big cat parts and derivatives from entering illegal trade from or through such facilities;
- B) that such management practices and controls cover the disposal of Asian big cats which die in captivity; and
- C) that such management practices and controls are strictly implemented.

Decision 14.69 directs:

- A) Parties with intensive operations breeding tigers on a commercial scale shall restrict their captive tiger population to a level supportive only to conserving wild tigers; and
- B) Parties should not allow breeding of tigers for trade in their parts and derivatives.

Apart from these, Res. Conf. 12.5 (Rev. CoP19) contains other relevant recommendations including that Parties:

- A) close legal domestic markets for Asian big cat parts and derivatives which are contributing to poaching or illegal trade of Asian big cats; and
- B) consolidate and ensure adequate control of stocks of Asian big cat parts and derivatives, and destroy the same unless they are to be used for educational or scientific purposes.

## APPENDIX 3 Table describing characteristics of different tiger breeding types

Adapted from Sarah Christie, ZSL (2013) Preliminary Study of the Feasibility of a Tiger Restoration Programme in Cambodia's Eastern Plains (Appendix II)<sup>8</sup>

	Tigers in conservation breeding programmes <sup>9</sup>	Tigers held by private breeders (including for profit)	Tigers farmed for profit
Desired product	Gene pool - long-term maintenance of maximum possible wild gene diversity. <sup>10</sup>	Live animals.	Live animals and parts.
Aim	Maintain a behaviourally, physically and genetically healthy population over at least 100 years.	Produce young for sale or private needs as required by the individual.	Maximum profit from tourist viewings and interactions and via sales of parts and live cubs for commercial purposes. Produce the maximum possible amount of product at the least possible cost over time.
Record keeping	All tigers can be traced through institutional records, with ancestry fully known and recorded.	Records kept, if any, are unreliable and confined to a single location.	Records are likely to be unreliable and confined to a single location.
Founder stock and breeding pool	Stock clearly tracing back to known wild caught founder stock and geographic origin (labelled using sub-specific designations) and therefore contain discrete sets of genetic adaptations to a particular habitat and climate type. Each regional population is managed to conserve a gene pool as broadly representative of the original wild population as possible.	Any animals available. Ancestry and hence geographical (subspecies) origin are unknown.	Any animals available. Ancestry and hence geographical (subspecies) origin are unknown.

<p>Coordination of breeding</p>	<p>Regionally or globally managed by zoo associations typically involving a number of cooperating zoos, . Breeding recommendations based on genetic analysis, issued centrally and followed, after discussion, by all holders. Breeding outside recommendations actively avoided.</p>	<p>None. Interbirth intervals are likely to be short.</p>	<p>None, or only locally within a facility. Interbirth intervals are likely to be extremely short; the handrearing process means that it is possible to produce several litters a year from a single female if desired.</p>
<p>Genetic management strategy</p>	<p>Equalise and maximise the founder base. Avoid inbreeding.</p>	<p>None. Lack of central records and/or known-origin founder stock makes genetic management impossible other than local avoidance of inbreeding if the breeder wishes. Inbreeding may occur deliberately at a given location for traits such as breeding well in captivity, docility and friendliness, and breeding for recessive genes i.e. white tigers.</p>	<p>Fix desirable traits (high product yield, good adaptation to conditions, e.g. docility and friendliness) by breeding preferentially from the stock that does best in farming conditions. Breeding may also select for recessive genes, i.e. white tigers. May inbreed in order to achieve this.</p>
<p>Demographic management strategy</p>	<p>Based on demographic analysis. Breed only as many animals as can be appropriately housed within the programme for their lifetimes. Lengthen interbirth interval (breed slowly) to minimise genetic drift.</p>	<p>Breed at random to meet commercial demand or personal desires.</p>	<p>Breed as many as can be housed in a given time period, to maximise product yield.</p>

<p>Approach to natural behaviours</p>	<p>Preserve natural behaviours. House only in facilities which preserve natural behaviours. Avoid hand-rearing or unnatural social groups.</p>	<p>Modify natural behaviours to suit the varying requirements of the breeder (eg hand-rear, remove claws or teeth from big cats).</p>	<p>Modify natural behaviours with a goal of increasing amount of product and profitability of overall operation. (e.g. hold this solitary species in large groups, hand or foster rear). To save money, the cubs are often hand-reared (in some instances have even been reared on pigs), and then housed in large groups of same age youngsters for maximum tourist entertainment at minimum cost.</p>
<p>Effect on wild gene pool</p>	<p>Maintained. Maximum possible wild gene diversity.</p>	<p>Compromised. Lack of records means no knowledge of overall gene pool, but hybridisation, relatively low levels of genetic diversity and inbreeding are the norm.</p>	<p>In effect, domesticated. Rapidly narrowed gene pool, likely to be of mixed geographical ancestry and the populations have become adapted to the farming conditions of hand-rearing and unnatural social groups.</p>

7 <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/COP/19/resolution/E-Res-12-05-R19.pdf>

8 [http://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/feasibility\\_study\\_reintroduction\\_jan\\_2013\\_\\_1\\_.pdf](http://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/feasibility_study_reintroduction_jan_2013__1_.pdf)

9 See also IUCN Guidelines on the Use of Ex Situ Management for Species Conservation

10 There has been a tendency to focus strongly on the mixed subspecies ancestry of farmed tigers as a major reason for not sourcing animals from these populations for introduction, but in fact this is less important than the strong selection for adaptations to captivity that are consequences of the type of breeding management used. For many potential population restoration sites, a population of mixed geographic origin but with high allelic diversity and without adaptation to captive or farming conditions would actually be preferable as a source to one that was originally of a single geographic origin but had been managed over generations for farming, because it would contain more capability to adapt to the wild habitat involved.