



MALAYSIAN CONSERVATION ALLIANCE FOR TIGERS

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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Celebration of the International Day of Forests for the Critically Endangered Malayan Tiger**

**22 March 2022, Kuala Lumpur:** This Year of the Tiger International Day of Forests, MYCAT wishes to celebrate Malaysia's natural forest that is rich in biodiversity which includes the Malayan tiger. Tigers will not survive for long if the natural forests continue to be cleared, degraded, and fragmented in the tiger's stronghold states of Perak, Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang, and Johor. We call on these state governments to take into consideration the urgency in halting natural forest conversion, fragmentation, and degradation.

The official population figure of the Malayan tiger is somewhere between 1-149 tigers left in the wild. If one were to use a simple arithmetic of looking at mid-range numbers, the scenario of only having 75 adult tigers is extremely bleak. In the past century when Malaysia had a few thousand tigers, the main threat to the declining population was habitat loss and poaching. Currently, with so few remaining (even if 149 tigers), any freak events like disease among tigers or their prey animals could wipe them out. Tigers need large intact and protected forests away from people.

One of the challenges of protecting our remaining wild tigers is that they are not found in one place but are scattered over large but increasingly fragmenting forest complexes called Central Forest Spine. Keeping the Central Forest Spine intact and connected is crucial for the survival of not only tigers but also of Malaysian public because it will provide people with ecological services such as flood mitigation, carbon sequestration, water purification, pollination, and livelihood for local communities. This is why the government made a master plan over a decade ago to connect the 5.3 million hectares of Central Forest Spine with 37 forest linkages. It is one of the many good policies.

As an effort towards the *Greening Malaysia* program, the Prime Minister officiated the *100 Million Tree-Planting Campaign* in 2021. Of many ambitious plans in this country, planting 100 million trees is an achievable one. Protecting natural forests and restoring degraded ones are both important for forest conservation. The Central Forest Spine masterplan indicates the priority areas for both. Greening is an action to restore places no longer vegetated. It is a great activity to raise awareness and get people involved in forest conservation. We commend these efforts but urge people to be cautious. Planting trees is easy, but for the trees to grow into a forest, and the forest to foster an intact biodiversity takes ages if it happens at all. Forest restoration requires a long-term commitment. Facing the grave threat of extinction, the Malayan tiger does not have decades to wait for trees to grow into forests.

For biodiversity conservation, the best practice is to protect existing forests from further loss and degradation. However, tigers are still losing their forests for timber, oil palm, rubber, durian and precious metals in critical tiger habitats whilst 100 million trees are planted elsewhere. Thus, political will and enforcement action to protect natural forest is urgently needed. Let's celebrate the Forest Day by being mindful of priority actions needed in halting natural forest loss and in understanding the nuances around tree planting/restoration efforts that may need further refinement to achieve maximum gains for biodiversity.

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