

Tapir under threat

World Tapir Day today puts a timely spotlight on an animal that's seriously under threat of extinction, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

IT'S not the best looking of animals. Neither is it the sort that makes you want to reach out and cuddle it. In fact, the tapir, with its short, prehensile snout, small beady eyes, horse-like head and a shape similar to a pig, looks rather odd, almost like it was assembled somewhat hurriedly when it was created.

According to Chinese folklore, after God created the land and sea, He decided to fill it with live inhabitants. He moulded different body parts comprising various shapes and sizes for the creation of wildlife and combined them together to create elephants, wild boars, tigers, monkeys, birds and others. God was satisfied with his work but there were still some leftover body parts. Not wanting to waste anything, He put together the leftovers and made the tapir. That's why the tapir is also known as *si bu xiang*, which simply means having the resemblance of four different animals while looking like neither.

Handsome or not, the tapir is being celebrated in conjunction with World Tapir Day today. The animal is an important part of the ecosystem in its role as seed disperser. It's also one of the oldest surviving genera in the animal kingdom. But despite its size, history and ecological importance, the poor tapir remains one of the least recognised species of animals.

RAISING AWARENESS

World Tapir Day, which takes place every year on April 27, was established to raise awareness of the four species of tapir that inhabit central and south America and Southeast Asia.

All are in decline, with the mountain tapir facing extinction within the next 20 years if conservation efforts aren't introduced in its ever-shrinking habitat in Colombia and Ecuador. The baird's tapir, the largest mammal of the Americas, is facing a similar threat in its home range in central America.

Meanwhile, the Malayan tapir is also facing severe threat in Indonesia and other countries due to habitat destruction. Even the Brazilian tapir, the most numerous species of tapir, is vulnerable because of the



Picture by Carl Traeholt

increasing rate of destruction of the Amazon.

WIDER THREAT

As large herbivores, the tapir is the first to be affected by human encroachment into its territory. It's also the last to return to re-growth forest. The mountain tapir and Asian tapir population are the most at risk. The Sumatran population of the Asian tapir may no longer be viable as there have been suggestions that only 50 animals remain in the wild.

Tapirs require substantial tracts of undisturbed land for them to maintain a genetically-diverse population. They inhabit jungles, grasslands, swamps and cloud forests — all threatened by human activity, whether through mining, oil palm plantations, roads or settlements.

The plight of tapirs is symbolic of the wider threat to their habitats specifically, and world ecology in general. The decline of tapir populations is indicative of the general health of their ranges. Their disappearance from their home ranges often marks a point of no return for the natural environment. The destruction of forests into small, isolated enclaves and

the encroachment of human activity into pristine forests affect all native species. However, as the largest, and perhaps the quietest, of animals in their ranges, tapirs disappear without trace, along with countless other species.

MNS TO ACTION

The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), in collaboration with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE), Department Of Forestry and National Parks (Perhilitan), Faculty Of Forestry of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Mutiara Resort Taman Negara, is celebrating World Tapir Day today at the Mutiara Resort Taman Negara — Kuala Tahan, as a public event for the first time ever in the country.

The main objective is to create awareness of the importance of Malayan tapir conservation especially in the peninsula. Events such as guided walks, colouring competition, talks and a musical performance have all been lined up. There will also be an overnight education camp today and on April 28, conducted by UPM for local students. Details at www.mns.my.

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FAST FACTS

- The Malayan tapir (*Tapirus indicus*), also called the Asian tapir, is the largest of the four species of tapir, measuring up to 1.8m long and weighing up to 350kg. It's also the only one native to Asia.
- The Malayan tapir lives in the rainforests of Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Sumatra in Indonesia.
- Tapirs aren't related to anteaters, pigs or hippopotamuses. Their closest relatives are horses and rhinoceroses — the only remaining families of the Perissodactyla order. Extinct species of tapir would have looked similar to the four extant species, although the proboscis (snout) only evolved in the last few million years.
- A tapir can live up to 30 years, but like many aspects of tapirs, the average lifespan of wild tapirs is poorly researched. The gestation period of a calf is around 13 months. Baby tapirs have striped and spotted coats for camouflage and weigh between 8-12kg at birth.
- Tapirs prefer a wet climate and usually live near water, but can on occasion, be found in comparatively dry forests. They like to bathe, they swim well and can remain submerged for several minutes to escape predators. They're also excellent climbers and with their size and thick skin, can bulldoze through thick vegetation to escape.
- The Malayan tapir eats the twigs and growing tips of a wide range of vegetation, including snapping small to large saplings with its mouth to get to plant parts that are out of reach. It also takes a large variety of fruit and leaves from the forest floor.
- The Malayan tapir is an important seed disperser. They consume large amounts of fruit, helping to disperse the seeds. It is regarded as keystone species that play an important role in shaping and conserving the biological diversity and ecological functions of the forest.
- The Malayan tapir is an important indicator of the health of its forest environment. Due to its bulky disposition, it's sensitive to changes in its surroundings and is usually amongst the first to be affected.

(Source: Malaysian Nature Society)

Tapir Specialist Group

IN 1980, the Tapir Specialist Group (TSG), a scientific organisation was founded as one of the 120 Specialist Groups of the International Union For The Conservation Of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission (SSC).

Its primary goal is to conserve biological diversity by stimulating, developing, and executing practical programs to study, save, restore and manage all four species of tapir and their remaining habitats in Southeast Asia as well as central and south America.

The members are involved in various projects to understand tapirs better and to protect remaining populations of all four tapir species. They carry out scientific research (both in the wild and in captivity), conduct educational and public awareness programmes in local communities near tapir habitats and support habitat protection efforts.

Today, the TSG has approximately 100 members from 25 countries worldwide — including field researchers, educators, veterinarians, governmental agencies, NGO representatives, zoo personnel, university professors and students — who are directly or indirectly involved in tapir field research and/or captive breeding in their respective regions.

Support the Tapir Specialist Group conservation efforts at www.tapirspecialistgroup.org.