Tiger Tiger Burning Bright, From Orange To Tabby, Snow and White

Tigers of different colors historically existed throughout nature, their different coats allowing them to fit into varying environments. Today, less than 1% of the original tiger population still exists. The standard, golden tabby, royal white and snow tigers are important representatives of their wild ancestors. Their striking appearance inspires awe in the public mind and motivates people to take an active role in wildlife conservation. Throughout the rapid loss of the wild tiger, now at more than 99%, the blood lines of these rare color varieties were being preserved in zoos and wildlife preserves. Since they do not have a direct pedigree back to their wild ancestors, these cats have been labeled "generic tigers." Currently many major zoos are focusing on the different subspecies of tiger and are pushing for the extinction of the generic tiger through the prevention of breeding. The thought behind this lies within the belief that tiger subspecies contain wide genetic differences which must be preserved. Recent genetic studies have shown us that many generic tigers are in fact pure subspecies. Perhaps even more important to the direction of tiger conservation, genome studies show us that there is almost no genetic difference between tiger subspecies. The difference between subspecies lies more within the establishment of political boundaries than with genes. In fact, the genetic difference between the Amur and the Caspian tigers, the two subspecies separated farthest geographically, is only one single nucleotide. There is far less genetic variability between a Sumatran tiger and a South Chinese tiger than there is between people from China and people from Ireland. . . . . and human races are certainly not considered subspecies. Due to the limited population of both wild and captive tigers the world over, and the truly limited genetic variability that exists amongst tiger subspecies, it may be considered good thought to save the tiger as a species instead of attempting to break it down into smaller parts. By preserving the genetic stock that currently exists, we will be much more likely to save the species as a whole. The Chief of Genomic Diversity at the National Cancer Institute, Stephen Obrien, states that, "My personal feeling about it is, we're backing up a tiger population in the wild that is not doing very well. To tell the truth, I'd rather have the animal alive in a few hundred years than simply lose it by exterminating all captive animals." The generic tiger population is currently ten times larger than all the "pure" subspecies held in larger zoos. This gene pool may prove to be the best hope for saving all tigers from total extinction. . . . . and to lose the wonderful colors of the tiger because of politics and lack of understanding would not only be a disgrace, it would make the world a far less wondrous place for all the generations that follow.

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