KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

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Final fight to save our tigers

In this Year of the Tiger, *The Star* goes behind the scenes of an ambitious project to breed and rewild *Panthera tigris jacksoni*.

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HETTY, according to her guardian, doesn't like males.

Pacing restlessly up and down her small chamber, she occasionally tries to catch a sniff of the scent from the visitors who have come up the path to her block.

At just 15, Hetty is already considered too old to be a mother but it's not her reproductive health that's causing problems.

"According to the veterinarian, she's perfectly fine. Her reproductive system is functioning well. It's just her individual personality. She doesn't like males," explains her caretaker, assistant wildlife officer Nik Mohd Zamani Awang.

Named after the veterinarian who attended to her birth at the Malacca Zoo, Hetty is one of several tigers making up Malaysia's ambitious tiger breeding and rewilding programme at the National Wildlife Rescue Centre in Sungkai, Perak (NWRC).

Located some two hours from Kuala Lumpur off the North-South Expressway, Sungkai isn't much of a town: a single-lane road passes by some weather-weary shoplots before meandering into a kampung, hemmed in by dense forest on both sides and occasionally serenaded by the whoops of gibbons in the distance.

But this is where, tucked behind a series of nondescript buildings and shaded by tall forest trees, a bold project by the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) is taking place.

It is here that wildlife authorities are hoping to breed some of Malaysia's last tigers and, hopefully, with the birth of new cubs, eventually rewild the *Panthera tigris jacksoni* in our jungle.

The programme is also Malaysia's last battle to save the subspecies, which is not only in danger from poachers, encroaching development and conflict with humans but also diseases like canine distemper spread from pets.

The privately-run Laohu Valley Reserve in South Africa is about the only other project attempting to breed and rewild tigers, specifically the South China subspecies.

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Meet Hetty, a Malayan tiger on whose shoulders lie hope for the future if she can produce cubs – but that's not an easy thing to do. – LOW LAY PHON/The Star