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Tiger tracker — Howard Quigley places a radio-collar on a Siberian tiger. Quigley is part of a team researching tigers in Russia's Amur region, a 1,000-mile coastal range bordering the Sea of Japan.

Idaho's tiger tracker

UI researcher studies Russia's big cats

BY PETER HARRIMAN
Staff Writer

From the poet William Blake's "tiger, tiger burning bright," to Rocky's eye of the tiger, to the mascot of half the high school athletic teams in America, tigers convey potent messages about intensity, ferocity and sheer power.

Howard Quigley knows all about those aspects of tigers firsthand, having dealt with the business end of the big cats for the past year in far eastern Russia. For him, tigers also symbolize an opportunity for man to recover ecological grace, they are the bridge upon which U.S. wildlife researchers can transfer new technology to their Russian counterparts, and tigers can cement the international research reputation of the Hornocker Wildlife Research Institute at the University of Idaho.

The institute might be subtitled Cats R Us. Its cornerstone is Maurice Hornocker's pioneering studies with Idaho cougars in the 1960s, and three projects with cougars are still ongoing. Quigley, the new institute president, did his Ph.D dissertation on jaguars, and he hopes to develop studies on cheetahs in Zimbabwe and ocelots in Trinidad next year.

Now, though, Siberian tigers are the stars. Four Americans and as many as 18 Russians are working full time to trap, radio-collar and follow the movements and activities of tigers in Russia's Amur region, a 1,000-mile coastal range bordering the Sea of Japan. The study is entering its second year and is planned for three to five years.

The work was featured on CNN Nov. 26. A CNN crew was on hand for a

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recent tiger capture, and Quigley stopped in San Francisco on his way back from the Palouse to Russia to do an interview to accompany the videotape.

The study "has expanded dramatically. We started off with one reserve. Next year, we will open our third study site," Quigley says.

"The sky's the limit, and tigers need that attention now. They are on the brink, really."

On the brink, but capable of being pulled back and saved from extinction, he believes. The threats are resource development and poaching. The breakdown of the old Soviet system has left virtually everything with a price on it in Russia, including the huge hardwood forests where the northernmost subspecies of tigers live — and the cats themselves. Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are full of newly minted rich people "who have \$5,000 to \$10,000 to have some tiger soup made up," says Quigley.

"The Communist regime used its resources at a slow, sustainable rate. Now, with the borders open, the tiger is a resource — whether illegal or not. The irony is in trying to create one of the biggest democracies ever, the offshoot might be the extinction of the tiger.

"If we harvest the forests of Russia's Far East and Siberia, how can we do it so the next generation will have something there and not just empty forest?" Quigley asks.

Elk are Siberian tigers' primary prey, and Quigley points out that in the western U.S. certain logging practices can improve elk range and increase their numbers. Not enough is known, yet, to prescribe any conservation measures for tigers, though. Are the animals, like cougars, able to thrive in proximity to logging and roads or do they need solitude? How often do they produce young, and are the young successful in establishing their own territories? Those are questions the tiger study seeks to answer.

While tigers face imminent

threats from development and poaching, for now there is a healthy population across tiger range, Quigley says.

Despite fears the tiger gene pool shrunk precipitously in the 1930s when the animals were hunted nearly to extinction, as tiger numbers recovered they apparently did so with the genetic diversity to ensure longterm survival of the species.

There are an estimated 400 tigers in the Amur region, and "we think right now it is a genetically healthy population," Quigley says.

The top of the food chain in far eastern Russia is like a really tough biker bar, where all the customers are formidable. There are sable that can pull down small deer, lynx as large as 80 pounds, wolves, leopards, tigers, black bears, and a Russian subspecies of grizzly bear that can intimidate even tigers. In the spring, says Quigley, a bear will get on a tiger track, follow it to a kill, and shove the tiger off the dead elk or deer and feed itself.

"Tigers may be an important source of food at a critical time of year for the bears when they are coming out of hibernation," Quigley says. Such interrelationships within the ecosystem Siberian tigers inhabit are a major focus of the tiger study.

The U.S. wildlife biologists have brought to their Russian counterparts modern capture and immobilization techniques and radio telemetry for following the movements of radio-collared animals.

The Russian biologists he has dealt with are astute observers, Quigley says, but until the Americans came their field studies had pretty much been limited to winter, when they could follow tigers in the snow.

Now tigers are captured in foot snares, immobilized with drugs and fitted with collars that emit a radio signal.

Not that the system isn't without its own challenges. Biologists had been using a coil spring about the diameter of a finger to serve as a shock absorber between the wire snare that encircled a tiger's foot and the cable that secured the snare to a tree. Nice idea. Not big enough. One 400-pound male straightened out the spring.

The Hornocker Institute set down its formal affiliation with the UI in a contract last July. Hornocker and Quigley hold UI faculty appointments, the institute is headquartered in the UI Continuing Education Building, and institute members will conduct seminars at the UI. The institute will also offer graduate students opportunities to participate in research projects, like the tiger study.

While the Hornocker Institute has exclusively focused on big cats so far, "we want to be recognized as broad-based ecologists," says Quigley. "I would like to think Maurice and I are

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good, basic biologists, good scientists."

In taking on the tiger study, they are hewing to the institute's fundamental philosophy, says Quigley.

"The potential for doing something is there."

Man, who has been responsible for the wholesale loss of species and environmental degradation worldwide, has the opportunity to save one in Russia and to recover some ecological grace.

"I do think this is a project that offers significant contributions to science and wildlife conservation," says Quigley. "Ultimately, we're trying to have an impact. That's what keeps us going."

