



Majel chuffs at her admirers at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park.

GINA CIOU/5 STUDIO

A Trek on the Tiger Trail

THE SAN DIEGO ZOO SAFARI PARK EDUCATES VISITORS ON SUMATRAN TIGERS AND THEIR CONSERVATION.

MAJEL'S BREATH FOGGED up the window that stood between us as we admired her up close. She made chuffing sounds, which tigers do as a friendly greeting to one another. Majel is a 4-year-old female Sumatran tiger, who resides at the new San Diego Zoo Safari Park Tiger Trail.

The Tiger Trail, which opened in June 2014, is home to six Sumatran tigers. Delta is the 16-year-old matriarch, who has birthed four litters, two of which live at the Tiger Trail and include Majel and her sister Joanne, and 2-year-old males Thomas and Conrad. Teddy is the park's newest tiger, a 10-year-old breeding male, who will mate with either Majel or her sister Joanne.

"They both like him so we're going to see which one is his preference," says Autumn Nelson, animal care supervisor with the San Diego Zoo Safari Park.

Sumatran Tigers

The Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) is the last surviving tiger subspecies from the Indonesian islands. The other two, the Javan and Bali tigers, became extinct in the 20th century. The smallest of all surviving tiger subspecies, Sumatran tiger males weigh between 220 and 352 pounds, and females weigh between 165 and 242 pounds. Sumatran tigers possess the darkest coats, which range in color from tawny red to deep orange, show the least amount of white, and have the most numerous black stripes.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources lists the Sumatran tiger as Critically Endangered. Because of habitat destruction from over-logging and illegal hunting for tiger parts used in traditional Asian medicine, there are likely fewer than 400 breeding Sumatran tigers left in the wild.

San Diego Zoo Global, which operates the San Diego Zoo, SDZ Safari Park and SDZ Institute for Conservation Research, works to fight against the direct threat of illegal hunting by supporting on-foot poaching patrols in the Sumatran rain forests, which catch illegal hunters and rescue tigers from snares and traps.

At the Safari Park, scientists study a female tiger's behavior and monitor reproductive hormone levels to develop successful captive breeding programs. Because male and female adults don't live together, a male tiger is introduced only when the female is ready. Male tigers reach sexual maturity around 3 years of age and females around 4 years.

Environmental Enrichment

Wild tigers live an average of 10 to 15 years, while captive-born tigers can live up to 20 years. Ensuring those are happy years for the tigers in their care is priority one with the zoo keepers. That's why lead keeper Janet Lawhon and Nelson spent the past six years with the Tiger Trail architects to help design every detail with the tigers' enrichment in mind. The 3-acre exhibit cost around \$20 million, all of which was donated.

The tigers are rotated each day among the Tiger Trail's three different enclosures. "For enrichment purposes, all get to spend time in different exhibits so they can all smell each other and see different tigers every day," Nelson says. "It makes for a very enriching environment."

Tigers love water, and each enclosure has a water element that the tigers can swim in or just lie in. "When we designed Tiger Trail, we wanted to create the most dynamic environment we could, so that's why it has different levels, the water fall, different sized trees, so they can explore every inch of their exhibit," she says. "They do

enjoy exploring, smelling and playing. These are their natural behaviors.”

The enclosures even have heated rocks, which the tigers can lie on in winter. Heated bedroom floors help with the older tigers’ arthritis and keep newborn cubs warm.

The tigers receive different types of enrichment every day, from favorite toys and treats to scents. For example, zoo scientists did an enrichment study and found that the tigers enjoy various perfumes and essential oils. Individual tigers, like Majel, have their favorites.

“Majel is actually our most responsive tiger when it comes to scent enrichment. Her favorites include peppermint and rosemary essential oils, Forever Sunshine, Clinique’s Happy, and Coco Chanel, as well as anything provided by our male tiger, Teddy, or our male ocelot, Dafyd,” says senior keeper Lori Hieber.

Tiger Training

Those of us who live with domestic cats know how intelligent they are and that they can be trained through positive reinforcement. This comes in handy when we have

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

Because over-logging is such a huge threat to the survival of Sumatran wildlife, the San Diego Zoo Global educates the public about conservation. Recycling, using sustainable woods and choosing sustainably harvested palm oil products can make a difference. Sustainable woods include: redwood, cypress, pine, hickory, white oak, Douglas fir, red oak, alder, sugar pine, cedar, southern yellow pine, bald cypress.

For information on palm oil sustainability, go to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil at www.rspo.org.

For More information on the Tiger Trail, visit www.sdzsafaripark.org/tigertrail/.

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to condition them to their carriers to make vet visits less stressful, plus cats seem to enjoy the mental stimulation. Tigers are no different.

Using 4 pounds of nutrient-enriched ground beef and a whistle, keeper Lacey Byrnes demonstrates a training session with Majel. Similar to clicker training, the trainer gives a command for a desired behavior, such as sit or touch the target. When the tiger performs the desired behavior, the trainer blows a whistle to mark the behavior and feeds a handful of the ground meat. While Majel touches the target, the trainer examines her paws. These behaviors help the keepers take better care of the tigers and minimize the need for sedation.

Because of this training, the tiger voluntarily allows the keeper to draw blood from her tail when necessary, trim nails, examine teeth, vaccinate, weigh the cat by luring her onto a scale, even give a pregnant female an ultrasound, all without the need for anesthesia. During these exams, there is always a protective barrier

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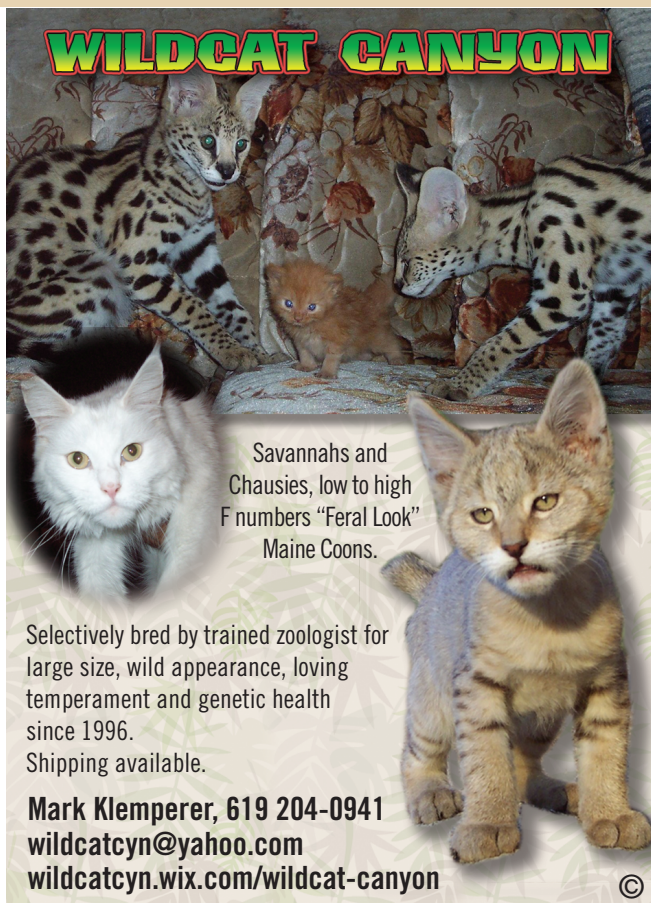


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process so that, as they get older, they get used to it and actually bond with the trainer,” Nelson says. “It makes for a very calm tiger. Of course, you can never take the tiger out of the tiger. But they are more calm and less stressed by anything unusual. If they’re not feeling well, we can find out what’s wrong, and that’s where the training really does come in handy.”

As soon as they start eating meat at about 6 weeks old, the cubs begin their **Using food and treats, keeper Lacey Byrnes rewards Majel for allowing her to conduct an exam.**

between the keeper and the tiger.

“The tigers become voluntary participants in their own care,”

Nelson explains. “When the cubs are 2 to 3 days old, we start the bonding

training. They learn how to sit and lie down, then, once they get older, they learn more advanced behaviors.

“The husbandry of animals has really advanced in zoos and this really has helped advance their care,” Nelson says. “Tigers by nature are shy, secretive animals and live in dense forests. When you work with them and form that bond, they become fun animals to work with.” 🐾

Susan Logan-McCracken has been the editor of CAT FANCY for 10 years. She is devoted to cats both big and small.



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