



## Another continent, another rare cat . . .

Photography by Steve Teo

**H**alf a world away from Scotland is another endangered big cat. It is the tiger, known in Asia as the king of the jungle.

Thousands of tigers once roamed grasslands and forests from Siberia and the Caspian Sea, throughout India, to Indochina, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and Bali.

The invention of the rifle spelt doom for the tiger. Within about 100 years, the beasts were literally decimated. Big-game hunting put tiger trophies in aristocrats' drawing-rooms all over Europe. Ironically, Europeans now champion animal conservation and ecology.

Asians treated the tiger no better. Some still hunt it down and sell for a huge profit body parts as aphrodisiacs or amulets.

In Indonesia, the Balinese and the Javan tigers are extinct. No-one knows

exactly how many Sumatran tigers remain in the wild as paw-print counts are unreliable. Recently, Mr Ron Lilley, a co-ordinator for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), said about 500 remain in Sumatra, with numbers dwindling because of a shrinking habitat and poaching, and it may become extinct within 50 years.

In Java, the tiger is an ancient cultural symbol of mercurial and violent power (in Freudian terms, the id), in stark contrast with the banteng, the wild cattle representing the Javanese ideal of steadfastness and restraint (the super-ego).

In the colonial period, the Javanese people staged popular fights between the tiger and the banteng in order to see a bloody, real-life battle between the id and the super-ego. In the late 18th century, such fights were often held publicly for the benefit of visit-



Sumatran tigers, safe in Singapore Zoo

ing Dutch dignitaries, who were generally ignorant of their symbolism. The Dutch, whose national symbol is the lion, were represented in these fights by the tiger. They were surprised when the banteng, with its superior staying power, almost always won.

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore and for a short time Governor of Java, fully understood: "It may be readily imagined with what eagerness the Javans look to the success of the banteng."

As tiger populations continue to dwindle, we can only hope that places such as safari parks and zoos play a genuine role in educating the next generation about tigers.

