



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

It's easy to become hardened to bad news when you work in conservation. If you're not careful, it becomes a relentless wave of faceless facts and figures. But a recent announcement by WWF really shocked me.

A team using remote video cameras in Indonesia captured rare footage of an endangered Sumatran tiger prowling through a protected forest in Riau province.

Just a week later, the same camera captured a bulldozer illegally clearing the tiger's wildlife-rich home to make way for an oil-palm plantation. And just a day after that, it recorded a tiger walking through the devastated landscape.

It's common knowledge that habitat destruction and other threats have pushed the Sumatran tiger to the brink of extinction (there are just 400 left out of a worldwide tiger population of about 3,200).

And it's well known that Indonesia is one of the world's top palm-oil producers – a recent study showed that 40 per cent of lowland rainforests in Sumatra and Indonesian Borneo have been cleared in the past 15 years alone. But seeing these two distressing issues so dramatically and evocatively linked slammed home the severity of the situation more than all the facts and figures in the world.

The words 'palm oil' are a bit like 'global warming', 'sub-prime mortgages' or 'saturated fat' – just hearing them sends a signal to our

brains that says 'bad', though we're not entirely sure of the details. But we should know about it, because the rapid expansion of oil-palm plantations in South-East Asia (to provide 'vegetable oil' for everything from bread, breakfast cereals and chocolate to chewing gum, washing powder and soap) could be the single most important threat to the greatest number of species on the planet.

And it is something we should all be helping to solve, by supporting campaigns that put pressure on food manufacturers and supermarkets to use only officially recognised, eco-friendly, sustainable supplies. Meanwhile, I can't stop thinking about that tiger. Where is it now?



A bulldozer was filmed illegally clearing a forest in tiger territory.

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Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and TV presenter.