

## **Menyemah Kampung: Creating a Harmonic Life with the Sumatran Tiger**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Sumatran tiger is one of the keystone species increasingly under threat. Several traditional communities perceive the tiger has an essential role in a broader aspect of life; the animal constitutes an integral part of their culture. This study discusses the interaction between the traditional Malay community around the Kerumutan Wildlife Reserve (KWR) in Riau, Sumatra, and the Sumatran tigers. We collected data through in-depth interviews with several local traditional leaders recruited by snowball sampling. The local people around the wildlife reserve believed that the tiger is a sacred animal and thus should be protected. The community perceived that the animal has several roles in guarding their village against evils. To respect the presence of the tiger, people around the KWR performed a ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* once a year. However, many changes have been taking place that change nature and the people, including the *Menyemah Kampung* ritual. Local people's perception changes toward the ritual may also affect the conservation of the Sumatran tiger.

Keywords: Conservation, local knowledge, Malay Society, tiger, traditional ritual

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Kerumutan Wildlife Reserve (KWR) is an in-situ conservation area in Riau Province, Sumatra, Indonesia. Lowland rain forests and swamp forests with a relatively flat topography dominate the landscape of the KWR. Administratively, the 12,000-ha conservation area is located in three regencies which are Pelalawan, Indragiri Hulu dan Indragiri Hilir ( $0^{\circ}10' N - 0^{\circ}10' S$  and  $102^{\circ}40' - 102^{\circ}06' E$ ). Various wild animals live in the KWR, including Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*), clouded tiger (*Neofelis nebulosa*), sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), and hornbill (*Buceros* sp.) (Budiman *et al.*, 2017). Traditional community settlements surround the reserve, mainly doing daily farming and fishing activities. Their close position to the wildlife reserve causes people often encounter wild animals. Frequent interaction with the wildlife over generations has gradually formed a local genius about the types, characteristics, and behavior of the wildlife they encountered (Struebig *et al.*, 2016).

The traditional people who live around the KWR are mostly Malays. The tribe use of everyday language which is close to Indonesian; however, in everyday conversation the end

of the words used are often replaced with the letter "ě" instead of "a". For example, the Indonesian word "dimana" is changed to "dimaně", "siapa" becomes "siapě", "ada" becomes "adě", and so on. Historically, people have been widely known the tribe as one of the tribes with "unseen" or magical powers, heavily influenced by animism and dynamism that has developed since their previous ancestors (Winzeler, 1983). This magical power also colors the relationship between the community and several wild animals, including tigers, in the surrounding environment. For example, the Talang Mamak people who inhabit the Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park area believe that tigers are the incarnation of the spirits of their dead ancestors and enter the tiger's body that serves as the guardian of their village (Irawan, 2014).

Several other traditional communities also bear a close relationship between tigers and humans. Traditional communities in Kerinci (Jambi), Pesisir Selatan and Batu Busuk (West Sumatra), and Java perceive the tiger as wise wildlife and deserve respect (Adu *et al.*, 2019; Sunarti, 2020; Suryanda *et al.*, 2017; and Audina *et al.*, 2015). Traditional societies in India also assume that the tiger is a divine figure that protects those (Bhattarai and Fischer, 2014). People in Korea (Too, 1995) and China (Seeley and Skabelund, 2015) often use the tiger as a pattern of paintings or symbols placed in people's homes as a form of respect for the tiger god.

The Malay community living around the KWR has developed a harmonious relationship with tigers. This fact contrasts with other areas around the KWR and Riau areas which have been many cases of human-tiger conflict. These conflicts arise because of land clearing and overlapping of land use between humans and the tigers (Rahmadi, 2019). So far, no data has been available regarding the number of tiger populations in KWR. The Yayasan PKHS (2020) recorded 46 camera trap videos of tigers which identified four adult male individuals and four adult female individuals with an encounter rate (ER) of 0.47 and a relative abundance index (RAI) of 0.412.

A traditional ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* held once a year was a form that represents a close relationship between humans and the tigers. The tradition expressed gratitude to the tigers for protecting them from any torments. The people of Pungut Hilir Village in Kerinci also carry out a ritual of feeding tigers in the forest to express gratitude for protecting their fields or gardens from various kinds of disturbances (Adu *et al.*, 2019). The Serampas community in the Kerinci Sebelat National Park area carries out *kenduri psko* tradition, one of which is maintaining a harmonious relationship with tigers (Hariyadi, 2013).

Local tradition and knowledge associated with tiger conservation that the community had applied for generations are increasingly marginalized with the rapid modernization and globalization. Therefore, it is necessary to document local knowledge related to tiger conservation. The result of this study is essential in developing tiger conservation based on local wisdom, especially around the KWR area. This study discusses the practices of the Malay community around the KWR concerning tiger conservation efforts.

## METHODS

We mainly collected data from the people living in the Sialang Dua Dahan Village and Danau Baru villages (Figure 1) from September to November 2020. We conducted research in these two villages considering that there are still key respondents who know and understand the *Menyemah Kampung* ritual well and live in both villages. We collected data through in-depth interviews, selecting respondents using snowball sampling, starting from the village head. The respondents were seventeen, consisting of village heads, community

leaders, traditional leaders, and village shamans. We also collected data through participatory observation and non-participatory observation. The data were analyzed qualitatively following Huberman and Miles (2002). Data from the field was sorted by reading and reviewing the interview notes. We continuously and simultaneously collected and analyzed the data. We provided in-depth questions to the responses given by respondents. We double-checked data validity by consulting with the different respondents and using other data collection techniques, including observation and secondary data.

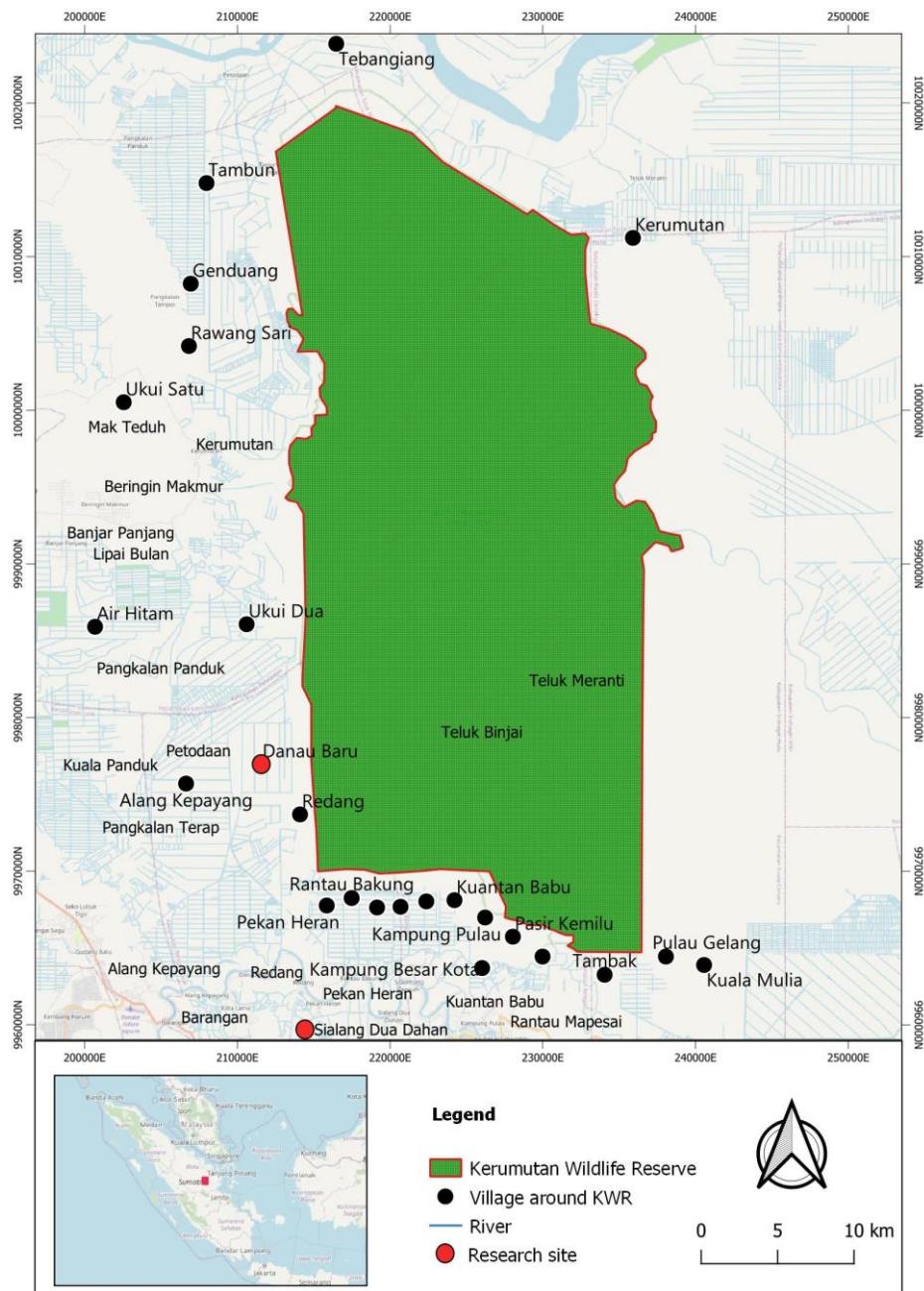


Figure 1. Map of Kerumutan Wildlife Reserve

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Local Traditions and Conservation

The Malay community around KWR was closely related to wildlife, especially the tigers. The community performed some traditions and cultural activities that reflected their closeness to the tiger. One of the traditions was *Menyemah Kampung*. The community perceived the ritual as an ancestral cultural heritage that should be carried out yearly. The community believed that the traditional practice of worshiping the village was an activity that created a harmonious relationship between the human world and the tiger world. According to Koentjaraningrat (2004), such a tradition is a form of culture in a complex of values and activities. Furthermore, we systematically arranged the collected data in temporary tables, charts, and diagrams to ease understanding of the data.

The *Menyemah Kampung* ritual can be interpreted as one of the natural conservation efforts carried out by the local communities around the KWR. The ritual of menyemah kampung had a role in shaping the mindset and attitude of the local community towards the tiger that was present around them. In a community that does not have a good relationship and good understanding of the tigers, the presence of these animals in a village may be evicted or even killed because they consider the wildlife a nuisance or threat (Inskip *et al.*, 2016).

However, the Malay community around the KWR perceived that they had to protect the tiger. They would let any tigers that pass through their village. Even the appearance of a tiger was a meaningful sign, either a good or a bad one, that might affect the whole community's life. For example, people interpreted a tiger across a road as a bad sign that something terrible would occur within or around the village. On the other hand, people interpreted a tiger walking straight down a road as a good sign that the tiger protected the villagers from various kinds of destruction.

Moreover, the Malay community around the KWR perceived the tiger as a wise animal and possessed a unique ability, thus able to communicate with humans. However, to communicate with tigers, one required spiritual strength, usually owned by a particular lineage of the Old Malay community. People believed that in the days of their ancestors, every village had someone who could communicate with tigers, usually called village shamans.

To become a village shaman, one must be a descendant of the Malay, have a good understanding of local customs and traditions, and understand the dynamics of natural and social phenomena well. A village shaman had a significant social influence on the community. The shaman would be a role model and a guide for the village community in understanding natural and social phenomena around them (Wildan and Irwandi, 2018). For example, when there was a pregnant woman out of wedlock, or someone intended to destroy the forest, people believed that the village shaman could identify the case and then find the right solution based on information whispered by the tiger guard to the shaman.

Traditional people in several areas in Indonesia, such as in the South Coastal area of West Sumatra, also perform cultural-based tiger conservation efforts (Sunarti, 2020). People in the area were familiar with *ba-ilau*, a traditional ritual to summon a tiger. People believed a tiger that disturbed the peace of a village community might be due to disharmony in their living system. To fix this, the community had to carry out the *ba-ilau* ritual. Communities in the Kerinci area were also familiar with the *ngangeh imo* (glorifying the tiger). This ritual was a form of respect for the agreement between their ancestors and the tiger. Moreover, when people see tigers injured or dead in the forest, they must perform the *ngangeh imo* ritual

(Usman *et al.*, 2014; Tomi *et al.*, 2019). People in South Aceh carry out the *Neurajah Rimeung* tradition at certain moments, for example, if there is a case of a tiger entering the village or a tiger eating a resident's livestock. This tradition aims to overcome conflicts or disputes between humans and tigers through "communication" to avoid hurting each other (Utari, 2015).

### The Traditional Ritual Procession of *Menyemah Kampung*

*Menyemah Kampung* literally means calling the village guardians. The tradition was carried out once a year, usually at the end of the year. The ritual was rich of meaning and symbols. The ritual procession required a lot of work that required mental and material sacrifice. Villagers usually work hand in hand to fulfill the ritual requirement. The preparation for the ritual consisted of constructing *rancak*, a mini house building and providing the offering materials. The ritual then closed with reading of a prayer. The procession of *Menyemah Kampung* required some materials and tolls, mostly taken from the forest around the KWR, such as *ketimoho* wood (*Kleinhovia* sp.), bamboo (*Bambusa* sp.), *binglu* leaves (*Zingiber* sp.), coconut shell, coals of fire, incense, candles, plates, bowls, banana leaves, and betel lime (Table 1).

Table 1. Tools and materials in the procession of *Menyemah Kampung* ritual

No.	Tools and materials	Description
1.	<i>Ketimoho</i> wood ( <i>Kleinhovia</i> sp.), bamboo ( <i>Bambusa</i> sp.), <i>binglu</i> leaves ( <i>Zingiber</i> sp.)	Constructing the building of "rancak" required four pieces of <i>ketimoho</i> wood (as the main structure), woven bamboo (as the floor), and some <i>binglu</i> leaves (as the roof).
2.	Coconut shell, coals, and incense.	The village shaman required these materials in the process of spell reciting when summoning the village guard tiger.
3.	Candles	The village shaman placed seven pieces of the flaming candle in the <i>rancak</i> . Villagers interpreted the dim candle flame as a sign of the coming of the village guardian tiger, although they could not see the wildlife physically.
4.	<i>Pinggen</i> (Plates), bowls, <i>limas</i> (banana leaves)	The plate and the bowl were covered with banana leaves to place the offering contents: cake, yellow sticky rice, roasted chicken, limes, roasted rice), seven cooked local chicken eggs, and betel lime.
5.	Betel lime	Local people used the lime to mark the village community's livestock cage ("x" sign) as a warning to the tigers, so they would not harm the livestock.

The traditional ritual procession of *menyemah kampung* took place for one day. The ritual began with making a rectangular *rancak* hut of two meters in length, two meters in width, and 2.5 meters in height. The *rancak* served as a place to put the offerings of food. Rancak was constructed in the morning using *ketimoho* timber (*Kleinhovia* sp.). People prefer to use this species given its light and ease of finding around the village. The site to establish the *rancak* must be next to the house of the tiger keeper shaman facilitating the ritual. People then put various kinds of offering food, including cakes, sticky rice, grilled chicken, chicken egg, limes, and incense on the *rancak*. Usually, the local women were the main actors in cooking and serving the food.

In addition to offering food, people also prepared handwashing water put on a *limas* (a small container made from banana leaves), plates, and seven pieces of candles. The core ritual started in the evening around 8.00 PM and finished around midnight. The entire village community attended the ceremony during the core ritual and sat in or around the village shaman's house. In addition, the atmosphere had to be calm; there should be no people showing any movement or making noise. Then the shaman who keeps the tiger came to the *rancak*, which has been filled with offering stuff, and then read a prayer or mantra to call the tiger village guards.

Rituals to respect the tiger as a village guard were also common in some traditional communities in Indonesia. For example, at certain moments, the people of Serampas perform a kind of traditional ritual and celebration in the village meeting hall (*Rumah Gadang*) as an expression of gratitude to the tigers for guarding and protecting the community (Hariyadi, 2013).

The community around the KWR perceived that the tiger guarding the village was an "unseen" figure that could not be seen with the naked eye, but they knew the tiger was coming from the changing flame of the flaming candle in the *rancak*. The dim candle flame indicated that the tiger was entering the ritual site. After some time, the fire from the candle returned to normal, indicating that the tiger had finished eating the offering food. The villagers then took and placed the food in the shaman's house. All villagers who attended the ritual ate the food together. People believe that consuming food that had been used for offerings had medicinal properties to cure various diseases. In this case, the offering food might be tasteless because the essence of the food had been taken by the previously summoned "unseen" figure.

After villagers finished the meal together, a local religious leader closed the ritual by chanting a prayer, hoping the village would be spared from any calamities. The procession of the traditional practice of *menyemah kampung* indicates a syncretism; acculturation between belief in animistic-dynamistic spirit and Islamic religious belief. Nowadays, people around the KWR mostly obey Islamic teaching.

Although the tiger is a carnivore, in the ritual of *menyemah kampung*, the community offered delicious food such as cakes, sticky rice, and grilled chicken. The food is a special dish that is served at various important events in the community. The food offering was strongly tied with the views of the local community, who place tigers as an essential part of their socio-cultural life. The tendency to place wildlife like humans (anthropomorphism) is also common in other cultures worldwide (Gomez-Melara *et al.*, 2021; Manfredo *et al.*, 2020). Positive perception and "closeness" to wildlife are expected to facilitate wildlife conservation.

In addition to the various types of food served, one of the primary plants used in the ritual is *ketimoho*, which is used to develop *rancak*, a mini house to place the food offerings. Some traditional community groups widely use the species as a medicinal plant. People in Southeast Sulawesi use *ketimoho* leaves to treat hepatitis (Arifa, 2021), whereas people in South Kalimantan use the leaves to treat nosebleeds (Lestari *et al.*, 2017). In addition, the leaves are also used to prevent gray hair growth (Yunita *et al.*, 2009). People in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea use *ketimoho* cambium as a medicine to treat pneumonia. They use the leaves as eyewash and chase head lice (Latiff, 1997). Paramita, (2016) analyzed that *ketimoho* has pharmacological potential as anti-cancer, anti-diabetic, antioxidant, and hepatoprotective. Laboratory tests show that *ketimoho* leaves contain alkaloids, flavonoids, saponins, tannins, and steroids (Clara and Alfarabi, 2019; Solihah *et al.*, 2018).

Besides having medicinal properties, *ketimoho* is also used for several other purposes. The strong *ketimoho* bark fibers are used as ropes and roofing material (Swaminathan and

Kochhar, 2019; Latiff, 1997), while its soft and white wood is used to manufacture household tools and knife handles (Swaminathan and Kochhar, 2019; Lestari *et al.*, 2017). Traditional communities on the Java Island believe that a *ketimoho* tree is a place for spirits to bring safety and happiness; pieces of *ketimoho* wood are considered magical (Purnomo, 2013). Traditional people in South Sulawesi use *ketimoho* leaves in the traditional ritual of *Appassili Biseang*, which aims to get rid of bad luck or get good fortune.

### The Figure of a Tiger Guarding the Village

The people around the KWR believed that tigers that came during the traditional ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* were more than one and had a unique (unusual) shape, respectively. Local people recognized seven tiger figures guarding the village based on their morphology and behavior, namely *Sibobat*, *Tinjau Beluko*, *Sikuak Laras*, *Bidan Raye*, *Putung Api Nenek Datuk Patut*, and *Sitengkes* (Table 2).

Table 2. Seven types of tigers that guard the village perceived by people around the KWR

No.	Tiger Name	Tiger Characteristics
1	<i>Sibobat</i>	Part of its body resembles the shape of a goat.
2.	<i>Tinjau beluko</i>	Its body was as high as a bush (about 160 cm).
3.	<i>Sikuak laras</i>	The bushes (trees) it passes through when it walks in the forest would be exposed.
4.	<i>Bidan raye</i>	It had only a single nipple; it lived in the clouds between the earth and the sky.
5.	<i>Puntung api</i>	Its body color was black as charcoal. Local people recognize a taboo to throwing away smoldering wood. Violations of the taboo would induce the <i>puntung api</i> tiger to anger the villagers.
6.	<i>Nenek Datuk Patut</i>	It lives in the local cemetery. It can appear in any form if summoned, such as becoming an old human figure.
7.	<i>Sitengkes</i>	One of its legs is a stump; local people often saw its feet' tracks in the forest.

Some traditional communities in several areas in Indonesia also recognize the unusual tiger figures. In the Kerinci area in the mid-west Sumatra, especially in Gunung Raya, people acknowledge the figure of the *Tingkis*. This tiger could transform its body into a human, but one of its legs is a stump (Usman *et al.*, 2014). In West Sumatra, people recognize *Cindaku*, a tiger that performs like a human who stands and walks on two legs (Yogi, 2016). The figures of the tigers that guard the village are preserved in the form of folk stories widely spread across various levels of society. The folk tales such as the tiger guarding the village provide some tiger conservation values. With these folk tales, people will learn more about the tiger in the hope that they will minimize conflicts between humans and tigers.

People around the KWR believe in the presence of a tiger guarding their village. A village shaman around the KWR shared his experience with researchers of a tiger guarding a village. One day, he went to a forest area far from the village to catch fish by boat. Usually, he leaves in the morning and returns in the evening. However, he was too absorbed and focused on catching fish that day, so he did not seem aware of entering too far into the forest interior. After realizing his position was already deep inside the forest, he tried to find a way

out, but the dense shrubby forest vegetation impeded him from getting out quickly. Eventually, he lost his way and got lost. He searched for a way out for a long time, but he could not find it. The day was getting dark, and the sun was barely visible anymore. He was fearful and anxious because he was in the forest, far from the settlements of his village community. While experiencing fear and anxiety, he suddenly remembered the figure of a tiger guarding the village. So without hesitation, he requested the village guard tiger to help him escape the forest. He chanted his request, "*Kalu iye Pak mintuo aku punye pogangan, tolonglah aku. Aku tongah kesosatan ni*"; if it is true that my ancestors had tigers guarding the forest, please help me now, because I am in trouble (lost)). Not long after his request, help came as a sound from a pile of wood that seemed to fall from a height above a human's head. He heard the sound three times at different times. Without further due, he followed the source of the sound, then unconsciously, when he listened to the third sound, he was already on the bank of the river where his boat was moored. He believed the figure of *Sitengkes* that guided him out from the forest. The shaman's true story portrays the local people's worldview about the tiger and bears a moral message that the wildlife is a wise living creature close to human life.

### **The Existence of Ritual *Menyemah Kampung***

The socio-cultural life of the community around the KWR has changed over time. Those changes also apply to their interaction with wildlife, especially the tiger. There is a shift in the community's view toward the *Menyemah Kampung*. Local people view the ritual as a form of ancestral culture that had to be performed every year. However, people around the KWR nowadays perceive the ritual as taboo because it contradicts the village community's beliefs, which have embraced Islam's teachings. Even in some village communities, the ritual is regarded as inappropriate. A hadith stated that "worshiping or asking other than Allah is a major sin called shirk" (Arifin and Khambali, 2016). The traditional ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* is said to be an act of shirk; because people put their hope not in God but in the figure of a tiger.

The traditional ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* is no longer performed. In Sialang Dua Dahan Village, the last ritual was carried out in 2000, while in Danau Baru village; the last ritual was carried out in 2015. Given the importance of this ritual for tiger conservation, it is crucial to revitalizing the ritual by placing it in a context in line with current community values and socio-cultural dynamics. People in the Aceh Province, especially in the regency of Pidies wisely interpreted the traditional belief toward tiger into their Islamic values. Gea (2019), reported that someone who might get lost in a forest while doing things that do not violate the rules, such as fishing and taking non-timber forest products, then asks for help and prays earnestly to the god. The god might give instructions to get out of the forest in the form of a tiger figure. The lost person would look for and follow the traces of the tiger's presence, such as footprints.

In addition to the change in local people's beliefs toward the traditional ritual associated with the tiger, some other factors have marginalized the *Menyemah Kampung* ritual. On the one hand, most of the village shamans who "kept" the tigers have passed away; on the other hand, the population of Malays descendants that should continue the tradition is very few because mixed immigrant tribes dominate the current village population. Moreover, knowledge associated with the tiger and its ritual is challenging to pass on to the next generation. As a result, the tiger population continues to decline over the years. Kholis *et al.* (2017) estimated that the population of the Sumatran tiger in the wild in 2015 was only around 371 individuals, and the population trend is likely to decline mainly

due to hunting and habitat fragmentation. Tiger hunting in Indonesia has occurred since the imperialism era and became massive in the 1980s due to the growing issue of tiger body parts that can be used as medicine, especially by traditional Chinese healers (Boomgaard, 2008). Tiger hunting and its habitat destruction are mainly carried out by migrant tribal communities (Meijaard, 2006) because they have no spiritual or emotional bond to the tiger and the forest.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Malay community around the KWR perceived the tiger as a sacred animal. The tiger became a part of local cultural values and traditions. They believed that the presence of tigers around the community was interpreted as a sign of good or bad things. Every year, the community holds a traditional ritual of worshiping the tiger in the village, which gradually forms the views and attitudes of the community towards the presence of tigers around them. The community places tigers as "village guards" from any harm. Such traditions also have a role in conserving the tigers, especially in KWR in the Riau Province. However, people no longer perform the traditional ritual of *Menyemah Kampung* because of some socio-cultural changes in the community. Reviving such tradition and putting it in a context aligned with current community socio-cultural values might contribute to tiger conservation, especially around the KWR.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Riau Sumatran Tiger Conservation and Rescue Foundation (PKHS) staff and management. They have provided help, advice, and support to conduct research in Riau Province. We also would like to extend our gratitude to the people of Sialang Dua Dahan and Danau Baru villages for their kind acceptance to conduct research in their villages. The study had become more accessible and enjoyable because of the kindness of people in these two villages willing and happy to share their valuable knowledge and experiences associated with the tiger.

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**Journal of Tropical Ethnobiology**

VOLUME V

NUMBER 2

JULY 2022

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