

## **People in Peril, Environments at Risk: The History of Tigers in Singapore**

**Dr Miles Powell, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

National Museum of Singapore, Gallery Theatre

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### **Introduction: People and Tigers in Peril**

Dr Miles Powell spoke about the environmental history of people and tigers in Singapore. Environmental history is how people transformed the environment and how that transformed environment in turn affected human history. What he found was not just a gory history of tiger attacks in colonial Singapore, but also the probable causes for the extinction of the Malayan tiger species in Singapore. He posited that both humans and tigers were victims of the “ecology of poverty”, which he defined at the end of the talk.

### **Tiger Stories: Attacks**

Struck by the many cultural depictions of tigers in present-day Singapore, Dr Powell was curious why there were no real tigers on the island, except those in the zoo. He found that tiger attacks were a real problem in colonial Singapore, with most estimates reporting one fatal tiger attack a day.

In 1843, the *Asiatic Journal* and *Monthly Register* reported that Singapore’s tigers killed more than 300 natives annually. In 1856, American Commodore Matthew Perry avowed that in Singapore, “not a day passes without the destruction of one human being by these ferocious beasts”.<sup>1</sup> In 1869, prominent naturalist and co-discoverer of “natural selection” Alfred Russel Wallace stated: “In Singapore, tigers kill on an average a Chinaman every day”.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Powell, however, found that the figures were most likely exaggerated. Singapore’s newspapers probably wanted good headlines to sell their papers. Foreign periodicals such as *The London Punch* and other Europeans supported this idea, suspecting that their Eastern contemporary was indulging in romantic notions. European visitors to Singapore might have also romanticised the danger of tiger attacks by inflating their reports of insatiable man-eating beasts.

Although 300 fatalities annually seem far-fetched, concrete evidence for shocking numbers of fatalities exists. In 1855, coroners’ records showed 13 deaths by tiger, 5 by wilful murder and 2 by natural causes. Singapore’s major English-language newspapers recorded at least 159 confirmed fatal tiger attacks between 1881 and 1890.

### **Who Ruled the Jungle?**

#### **Casualties**

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<sup>1</sup> Commodore M. C. Petty, *Narrative of the Expedition to the China Seas and Japan, 1852-1854* (London: Macdonald, 1954), p. 130.

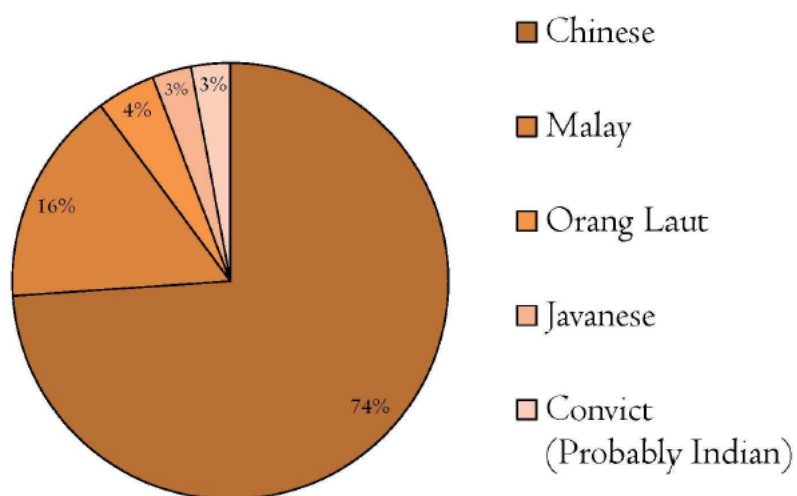
<sup>2</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Annotated Malay Archipelago* (Singapore: NIUS Press, 2014), p. 86.

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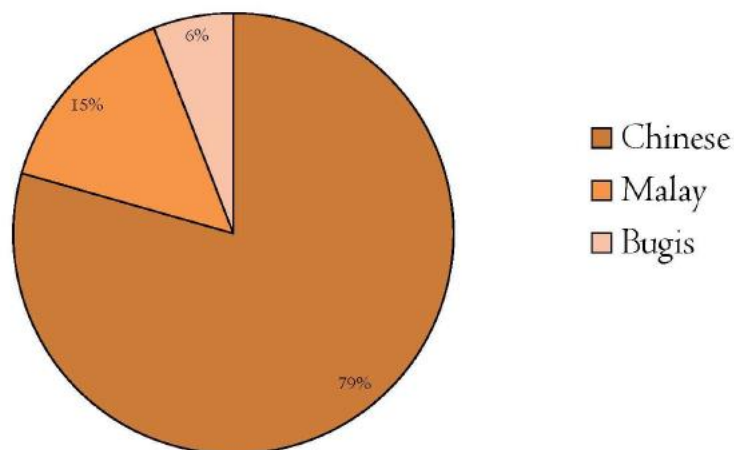
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Dr Powell found that certain ethnic groups had endured tiger ravages more frequently than others. These were the Chinese, Malays and Indians (see Figures 1 and 2). Western visitors, although they had exhilarating stories of tiger attacks, had no fatal attacks reported.

The Chinese were the most attacked. Although the Chinese represented just 40% of the population in 1830 and 65% in 1867, they consistently made up three-quarters of the victims from 1831 to 1890.

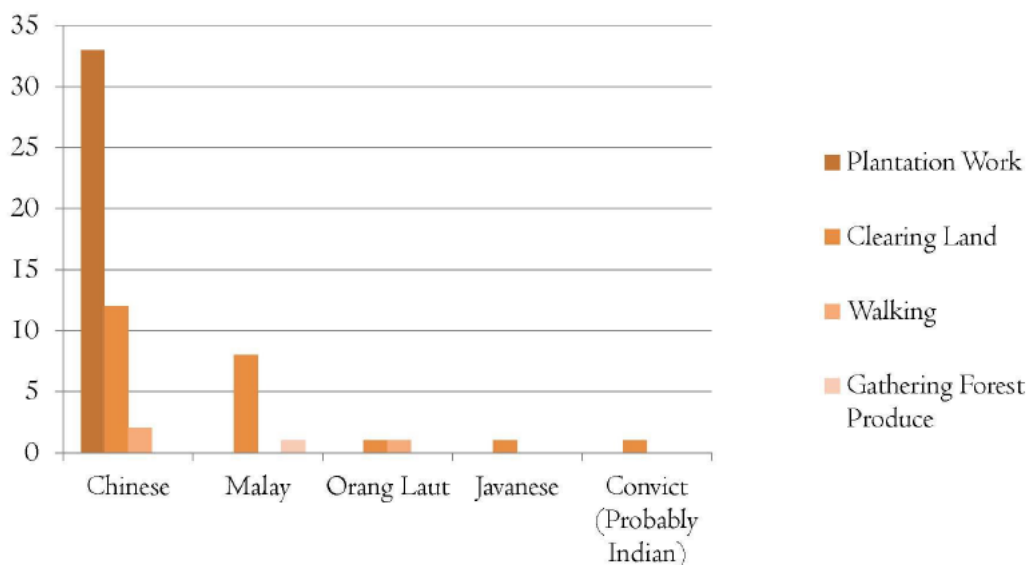


[Figure 1] *Ethnic Breakdown of victims, 1831–1860*



[Figure 2] *Ethnic Breakdown of Victims, 1861–1890*

The disproportionate number of tiger attacks on certain ethnic groups in colonial Singapore was likely due to the organisation of labour, rather than the then European speculation that tigers preferred the “taste of the Chinaman”. While the majority of Chinese fatalities occurred while labouring on gambier and pepper plantations, Malays primarily perished from tiger attacks while clearing land from Singapore’s interior and Indians from building roads, bridges and harbours.



[Figure 3] *Activity at Time of Death, 1831–1890*

With Orientalism prevalent in the minds of Europeans in the 19th century, the local ethnic groups were seen to be naturally suited to these areas of labour. This, along with the economic structure, kept the Southeast Asian immigrants to Singapore trapped in the struggle of poverty.

*The Struggles of Coolies*

While some paid for their own passage with assistance from family, most of the Chinese men relied on the “credit ticket system” as they were poor. An agency in Singapore would finance transportation and then passed the cost on to the local headmen. To repay this headman, the labourer would work without salary, often for one year. If a labourer paid off his debt, he would typically open a small plantation of his own with financial backing from Chinese merchants in town who demanded a share of future crops.

With the bulk of their profits going to financiers, many labourers were in a system of “debt-peonage” or debt slavery. These planters engaged in a merchant-dominated system of agriculture at the expense of nature. With the constant urge for profits and to evade governmental land-leasing fees, planters encroached ever further into the jungles, putting themselves into tiger territory.

It was estimated that plantations took up 4,000 to 5,000 acres in Singapore in the 1840s. By 1850, this ballooned to 24,228 acres of gambier and 2,614 acres of pepper. In 1862, Straits Settlements Governor William Cavanagh reported that 43,690 acres lay abandoned and

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tree-less while only 54,000 acres was jungle. As Chinese pioneers struggled within the strictures of a market-oriented colonial economy, so too did nature struggle to survive this onslaught of market forces.

### *The Struggles of Malays*

Malays, Orang Laut and archipelagic Southeast Asians from the islands that would become Indonesia provided the labour for clearing land. Most of them came from Dutch settlements, which had established a tribute system, called *leveringen* (“delivery” in Dutch), requiring Malay nobility to send the Dutch East India Company a fixed amount of produce at determined rates. This arrangement placed a major strain on the peasants, convincing many to try their luck in Singapore.

Besides clearing the bush, Malays also practised small-scale slash-and-burn agriculture, propelling further deforestation in Singapore. Like the Chinese coolies, Malay and Island Southeast Asian labourers in Singapore took dangerous jobs felling the rainforest, largely because their Imperial masters presented them with few better options.

### *The Struggles of Indian Convicts*

For infrastructure improvements, the Singapore settlement relied on Indian convicts to build roads, bridges and harbours. In the 19th century, Britain considered forced labour an especially efficacious form of punishment. The British East India Company tapped on Indian convicts to provide much of its labour because of their low cost.

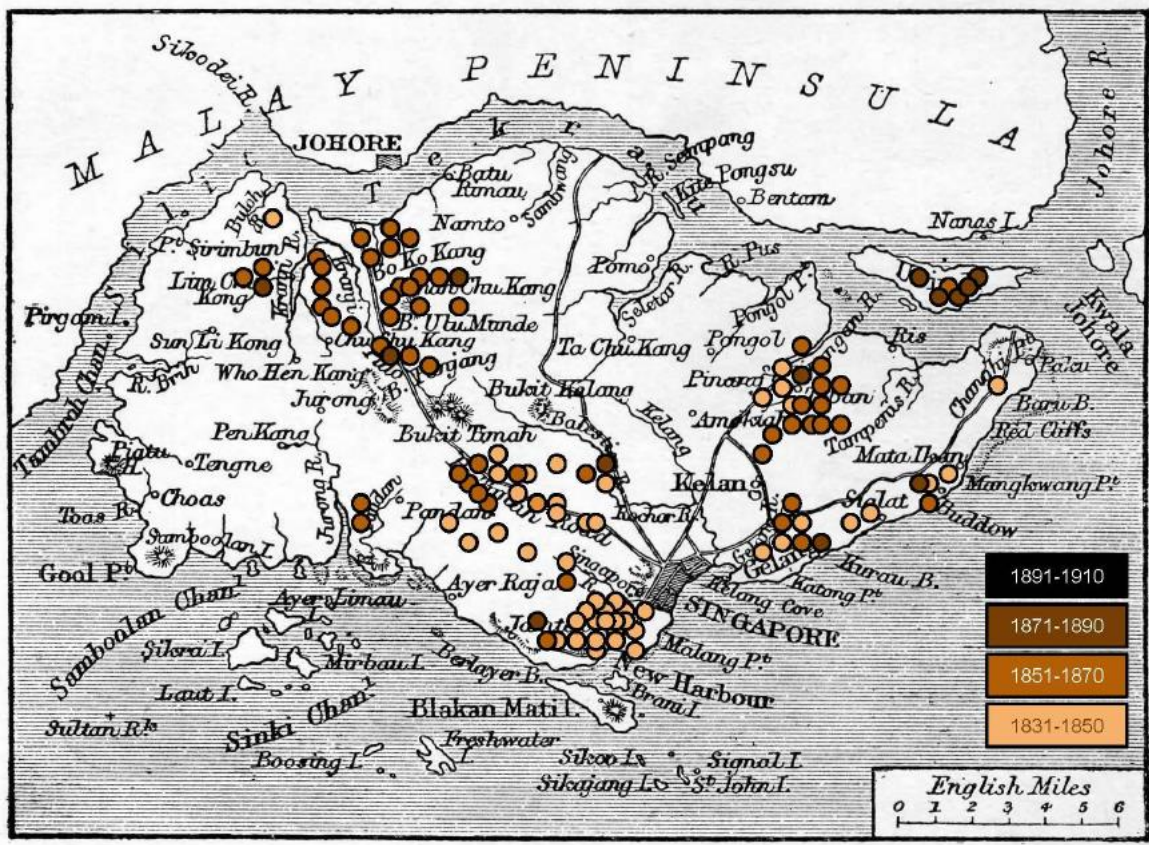
By 1861, Singapore had 2,173 convicts, with the vast majority being Indian convicts. These convicts experienced extraordinarily high mortality rates due to inadequate housing, rations and medical facilities, as well as, on occasion, tiger attacks.

The Indian convicts differed from their “free” East Asian counterparts in that they were engaged in forced labour. The economy, however, had trapped everyone in dangerous, often environmentally destructive work.

### *Tiger Theory*

Although the smallest species of tigers, a full-grown male Malayan tiger is approximately 8-foot-long and can weigh 300 pounds. They are powerful swimmers and numerous accounts recorded that Singapore’s population came from the Malayan Peninsula. Most tigers are not man-eaters so long as they have abundant vegetative cover and wild prey. They can live alongside people undetected.

In 19th-century Singapore, the spatial distribution of tiger attacks closely followed the progression of deforestation across the island from the southeast to the northwest (see Figure 4).



[Figure 4] Spatial Distribution of Tiger Attacks

A straightforward tale of habitat loss may be the more common theory as to why tigers attacked humans, but Dr Powell noted that the story is more complicated than that. With deforestation oncoming, why would tigers that swam to Singapore not swim back to the relatively well-wooded Malayan Peninsula? As an itinerant species, tigers likely swam for prey in Singapore. But this does not explain why the cat stayed.

Dr Powell hypothesised that the gambier and pepper plantations were not such poor tiger habitats. Instead, tigers may have preferred it. Ecological studies show that Malayan tigers reside in greater concentrations of logged forests, where cleared areas and edged habitats allow for the growth of underbrush preferred by preyed animals.

Similarly, 19th-century observers noted that both deer and pigs clustered near young shoots growing near the plantations. Moreover, plantations provided ample concealment for tigers to jump on prey. The concentration of prey animals on human-disturbed land is a likely reason that tigers chose to remain in Singapore. Even amateur historian Charles Buckley wrote in 1902: "it was when the gambier and pepper plantations began to extend beyond the town that tigers commenced to be so dangerous".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, 2 vols. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984 (first published 1902), p. 219.

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The creation of a new habitat in plantations, rather than habitat loss, was probably what tigers found enticing. But this meant that they could no longer remain isolated from humans, causing some of the tigers to instead incorporate humans into their diet. Plantation pioneers and labourers who ventured into the interior suffered the consequences of this new behaviour shaped largely by human activity.

## **Extermination – The Final Act**

Whatever the cause of 19th-century tiger attacks in Singapore, tigers terrified the human inhabitants. Virtually all of Singapore's major ethnic groups responded by hunting and killing tigers, although for different reasons and with varying levels of zeal.

Although the ethnic groups had sought assistance from their colonial government, they were neglected by the government, who also were unable to prevent tiger attacks. British administrators instead depended on their colonial subjects by placing a bounty on tigers, which was between 20 and 100 Spanish dollars, the common currency on the island at the time. This bounty no doubt appealed to the poor pioneers of the Singapore jungle, who found this as another means to make ends meet.

## **Final Straw**

The combined influence of this hunting was devastating to Singapore's tiger population. Between 1830 and 1910, there were 57 reported instances of humans killing or capturing tigers alive, although the latter was rare. Many other cases may have gone unreported.

Malayan tigers typically exist in densities of fewer than three per hundred square kilometres. Dr Powell speculated that there may have been only 15 tigers in Singapore at any one time.

Popular legend holds that a Britain shot Singapore's last wild tiger beneath the billiard table of the Raffles Hotel in 1902. This was, however, an escaped domestic tiger, which met its sad fate under the building's floorboards. In reality, a large multi-ethnic hunting expedition killed Singapore's last tiger in October 1930 near Choa Chu Kang.

In the end, Singapore's colonial subjects protected themselves from tigers when their British administrators proved incapable of doing so.

## **Conclusion: Ecology of Poverty**

Dr Powell concluded the lecture with his idea of an "ecology of poverty", which he defined as "a situation in which human activities resulting partly from indigence have rendered the interactions between some organisms in their environment untenable".

## **To Survive or to Survive**

In recent years, scholars have demonstrated that affluent, hyper-consuming societies take a disproportionate toll on the environment. Researchers have also identified an emerging global environmentalism of the poor that deviates from mainstream wilderness conservation by seeking ways for people to live and work in nature sustainably.

These discussions, although commendable, can obscure how poverty sometimes intensify and entrench eco-system destruction, particularly when combined with uncaring administrators, profit-driven investors and the ruthless logic of imperialism as it was in colonial Singapore.

In those times, the poor struggled to eke out a living by destroying rainforest at the behest of government officials and financiers. As these labourers struggled within this market-oriented colonial economy to transform forests into farms, houses and roads, they inadvertently created an ecology of poverty that had catastrophic consequences for humans and tigers alike.

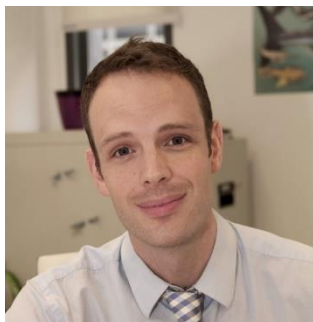
Faced with reduced forest, some tigers began to regard people as prey. This caused the labourers, who were trapped in debt-pionage, who were exploited by penal policies and who received little assistance from their colonial rulers, to protect themselves by killing tigers. No one, humans or tigers, emerged as victors, only victims of poverty.

*A Lesson to Learn: Compassion*

The environmental history in Singapore reminds those who care about the environment that the many people who destroy nature – the peasant slasher and burner of forests, the indigenous fisher of dwindling stocks and even the poacher of endangered species – do so, in part, because of prevailing economic and political conditions which have left them with few better options.

If we want to protect the environment, we need to assist and empower people. The world's tigers and the poor and marginalised people who most frequently interact with them both deserve compassion.

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#### **About the Speaker**

Dr Miles Powell received his BA and MA from Simon Fraser University, where he researched the environmental history of native herring fisheries in British Columbia. He completed doctoral studies at the University of California-Davis, developing fields in environmental history, American history, and world history. His first book, *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and The Origins of Conservation* (Harvard UP, 2016), uses discourses of extinction to explore connections between racial attitudes and environmental thought in late-19th and early-20th-century America. He is presently an Assistant Professor of Environmental History at Nanyang Technological

University in Singapore, where he is researching the global history of human interactions with sharks in the 20th century.

This talk is based on research conducted for the article "People in Peril, Environments at Risk: Coolies, Tigers, and Colonial Singapore's Ecology of Poverty" *Environment and History* 22(3) (Summer 2016), 455-482.

#### **About HistoriaSG**

HistoriaSG is a lecture series that focuses on important but lesser-known aspects of Singapore's history. With in-depth presentations by local and international academics on a range of topics viewed through a variety of lens from business to science and technology, the environment and specific communities, the series sheds new light on Singapore's culture, history and heritage. Organised by the National Museum of Singapore, HistoriaSG is part of the museum's efforts to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Singapore's history.

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