



# **ON THE PROWL: CELEBRATING THE TIGERS OF WALT DISNEY WORLD**

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In this centennial year of The Walt Disney Company, it's worth noting that its animation foundation features many memorable animal characters. Of course, there's the Fab Five – Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto, and Goofy. Dozens of other anthropomorphized animal characters have been introduced over the years, such as the Three Little Pigs, Horace Horsecollar, Gus and Jaq, Sebastian, Bambi, Dalmatians (101 of them!), Marie, Duchess, and the other felines from *The Aristocats*, and the title characters, alongside supporting animals, from *Lady and the Tramp*. Not all of Disney's animals are of the warm and fuzzy variety. *The Lion King* is an epic tale of the family power struggle, as told through the lens of three massively strong and powerful African lions – Scar, Simba, and Mufasa. The other powerful feline family that Disney has featured is the tiger. Shere Khan is the frightful antagonist in *The Jungle Book*; Rajah is Princess Jasmine's faithful protector in *Aladdin*. And a discussion of Disney tigers wouldn't be complete without talking about Tigger, Winnie the Pooh's bouncy flouncy friend.

But what about experiencing Disney animals in person? After all, Walt Disney himself was an advocate for profiling and advocating various animal species, at first through the True-Life Adventures documentary series. Walt had originally planned for Disneyland's Jungle Cruise to feature live animals on the banks of the river, but instead settled for artificial (but life-like) stand-ins, whose physical movements were activated by pneumatic air tubes.

#### **A New Park, and a New Environment**

The answer to where to find live animals under Disney's care is easy and clear. Guests should trek to Disney's Animal Kingdom in Walt Disney World, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary on Earth Day, April 22, 2023. The African town of Harambe hosts Kilimanjaro Safaris, which showcases the beasts of Africa, including majestic lions and lionesses. Nearby is Anandapur, Animal Kingdom's Asia section. Its geographical location isn't explicitly defined but instead is a pastiche of the rural elements of southeast Asia. Sanskrit is

the language of choice on signage since it transcends many dialects ranging from India to Indonesia. The Asia section wasn't ready for the park's opening day but made its debut on March 1, 1999. Within Anandapur were two attractions ready to entertain and educate Guests. The thrill ride was Kali River Rapids, a water-based flume attraction designed to showcase the danger of deliberate deforestation. The original plan for the ride was to have tigers visible along its banks, and the working title during development was Tiger Rapids Run before budget cuts altered the scale and scope of the attraction. One original design element that remains is a visage of a tiger's head in the rockwork at the top of the lift that carries twelve-person rafts to the head of the Chakranadi River. The other original attraction for Asia is the Maharajah Jungle Trek, a self-paced walking trail featuring various animal species indigenous to southeast Asia. It is on this trail that the grand tigers of Disney's Animal Kingdom can be found.

During the park's development, Walt Disney Imagineering executive designer Joe Rohde and his team identified the themes that should be wholly incorporated into the park design. The three key pillars of the park were: the intrinsic value of nature, a psychological transformation through adventure, and a personal call to action to participate in conservation efforts. The definition of intrinsic is 'to belong naturally,' and was a deliberate word choice by Rohde to reflect the values he wanted the park to convey. Under this framework, it's understandable to see how the hunting palace on the Maharajah Jungle Trek was designed for park Guests. The backstory is that wealthy maharajah in the past developed a lavish hunting lodge on the outskirts of the Anandapur Royal Forest. Five murals on the wall reflect the various past caretakers of the lodge. However, the maharajah are no longer in charge, and nature is reclaiming what was once its own. The overall theme of the lodge reflects humanity's arrogance over nature and how nature, over time, will reclaim what was taken. In other words, the intrinsic value of nature. Now, tigers and other Asian-based animals freely roam the grounds of the broken-down hunting lodge.

Disney officially describes the Maharajah Jungle Trek as such: *Legend has it that the Anandapur Royal Forest was once the hunting ground of wealthy maharajahs; today, it's a lush tropical paradise you can explore on a self-guided tour.*

It hasn't strayed far from its original design. The 1998 publication "The Making of Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme

Park" by Melody Malmberg and published under the Disney Hyperion imprint, serves as the official Disney history of the development of Animal Kingdom. It outlines the yet-to-be-opened Asia section's Maharajah Jungle Trek and the Imagineer's goals for it to carry forward the park's themes. Malmberg writes,

Guests will enter the village of Anandapur ('place of all delight' in Sanskrit) over a red brick bridge inspired by Nepalese temples. The village is the gateway to the Maharajah Jungle Trek and Tiger Rapids Run [the original working name of Kali River Rapids].

A humble house marks the entrance to the Anandapur Royal Forest and its Maharajah Jungle Trek, supposedly created by locals to capitalize on some of the forest's natural wonders...The Tiger exhibit devolved from a ruined hunting-lodge palace to an even more ruined hunting lodge at the behest of the (Zoology) Advisory Board [this board of zoological experts was convened to aid Imagineers in developing an authentic environment for the park's many animals]. They asked the Imagineers not to present guests with walls, as that design called up visions of dreary, old-fashioned menageries. Instead, they encouraged the Imagineers to tear down visible barriers to give the illusion that the tigers are freely roaming in a preserve shared with hoofed animals – blackbucks and Eldt's deer – that graze in the background. Guests will be on a bridge surrounded by wildlife. In Asia, the group of tigers will have access to both sides of their habitat via an underpass, which will be cooled in winter and warmed in summer, so the cats will not linger there but will use it only for traveling back and forth.

Against this backdrop, Guests can become part of the story as they amble along the walking trail. From the upper vista of a footbridge, they can see the majestic tigers roaming in habitats simulating those found in Asia. Certain species of tigers are adept to water, so a fountain was created in one of the tiger spaces. Keeping to the theme, the fountain foundation is crumbling, indicating that nature is reclaiming its territory.

With this background, it's time to talk about the tigers! Presently, all tigers on the Maharajah Jungle Trek are Sumatran tigers, indigenous to the island of Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago. This species is considered "critically endangered," with less than 500 living in the wild. Hunting and loss of habitat are the primary reasons for its decimated population.

When the Maharajah Jungle Trek first opened, it hosted



a variety of tiger subspecies, notably Bengal tigers. Since 2014, it's been exclusive to the Sumatran tiger subspecies. Disney's Animal Kingdom is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), which has created hundreds of Species Survival Plan\* (SSP) programs in cooperation with other AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums. These programs are designed to maintain or increase the number of endangered species in formal captivity. Per the AZA, "The mission of an...SSP Program is to...develop a Breeding and Transfer Plan that identifies population goals and recommendations to manage a genetically diverse, demographically varied, and biologically sound population." Within this framework, Disney has seen several of its Sumatran tigers come and go, rotating to different zoos when an ideal mating situation is deemed possible. In fact, two tigers were born at Disney's Animal Kingdom in 2017, achieving one of the goals of the Sumatran tiger SSP!

### Meet the Tigers!

Let's get to know the tigers that have roamed the ruins of the maharajah's hunting palace in recent years! There are notable arrivals and departures, and each tiger has a fascinating story.

Female Sumatran tiger Sohni transferred to Animal Kingdom in August 2014. Her name translates to "beautiful" in Hindi. Sumatran tigers are the smallest of the six

subspecies, with females weighing 165 to 242 pounds and males weighing between 220 to 300 pounds.

Malosi, a male Sumatran tiger, arrived at Animal Kingdom in September 2015 by way of the Point Defiance Zoo in Tacoma, Washington. Before that, Malosi was at the Honolulu Zoo in Hawaii. The AZA paired Sohni and Malosi in the hope of offspring, and that wish came true when it was announced in early 2017 that Sohni was pregnant. Tiger litters range in size from two to four cubs, and the gestation period for a Sumatran tiger is about three and a half months. On August 23, 2017, Sohni gave birth to two cubs – Jeda, a male with a cautious personality, and Alana, a more energetic and outgoing female. Each cub weighed about three pounds at birth. On their first birthday, Alana weighed 160 pounds, and Jeda was 167. For comparison, their father, Malosi, weighs 290 pounds.

The tiger cubs were formally named after closely observing their behavior and physical characteristics. Jeda translates to "pause" in the Malay language, and he has unique striping on his head that loosely resembles a pause button on current electronic remote controls. Since Alana presented a penchant for curiosity and adventure, she was given her name, which translates in Hindi to "fiery" or "sizzling." After their birth, Sohni and her cubs remained backstage to bond as the cubs developed. They eventually made their debut on the Maharajah Jungle Trek in late 2017,



## TIGER SCIENCE

From a taxonomy perspective, there are nine subspecies of tigers. For a refresher on the subject, the breakdown begins, appropriately enough, at the 'Kingdom' level.

**Kingdom: Animalia** (animals) followed by:

**Phylum: Chordata** (vertebrates)

**Class: Mammalia** (mammals)

**Order: Carnivora** (carnivores)

**Suborder: Feliformia** (cat-like)

**Family: Felidae** (cats)

**Subfamily: Pantherinae** (big cats)

**Genus: Panthera** (big cats)

**Species: Panthera tigris** (tiger)

and Subspecies, of which there are nine.

Three subspecies are now extinct, all during the 20th century. Hunting, habitat loss, and insufficient conservation programs contributed to their demise. These three are:

- **The Bali tiger** (*Panthera tigris balica*) which was indigenous to the Indonesian island of Bali
- **The Javan tiger** (*Panthera tigris sondaica*), which was native to the Indonesian island of Java, and
- **The Caspian tiger** (*Panthera tigris virgata*), which was native to central Asia and into China.

It's the most recently extinct species.

Of the remaining six subspecies, approximately 4,000 exist in the wild, and 10,000 are in captivity. All are listed as either Endangered or Critically Endangered by the IUCN, the International Union for Conservation in Nature. These three subspecies are considered Endangered:

- **The Bengal tiger** (*Panthera tigris tigris*)
- **The Siberian tiger** (*Panthera tigris altaica*)
- **The Indochinese tiger** (*Panthera tigris corbetti*)

The final three subspecies are one step closer to extinction, classified as Critically Endangered. They are:

- **The Malayan tiger** (*Panthera tigris jacksoni*)
- **The South China tiger** (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*) and
- **The Sumatran tiger** (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*).





thrilling Guests as they watched the young tigers grow into full-fledged adults. Alana is even a television star. She was featured in season one, episode six of the Disney+ series "Magic of Disney's Animal Kingdom."

All the animals at Disney's Animal Kingdom are stimulated with enrichment programs, such as food rewards that allow them to use their natural instincts. For Anala, her challenge was to retrieve tasty chunks of meat that had been placed inside a humongous pumpkin. Anala used her sense of smell to quickly identify the prize within, and with her natural instincts, she attacked the gourd and found the pre-drilled holes containing her tasty treasure, which she could claw out.

As adults and within the guidelines of the Sumatran tiger SSP, both Jeda and Alana have moved on to other zoos with to extend the Sumatran tiger population. In March 2021, Jeda was transferred to the San Antonio Zoo. Alana relocated to the Honolulu Zoo in July of 2022. Sohni remains at the Maharajah Jungle Trek, but sadly Malosi is no longer there. Disney has not publicly stated why, but tiger aficionados have discussed how he succumbed to cancer in early 2021.

Through the Sumatran tiger SSP, Disney's Animal Kingdom has a new arrival. Conrad, a male Sumatran tiger, relocated to the Maharajah Jungle Trek in October 2022. The goal of

the SSP is that Conrad and Sohni will mate and continue the lineage of the Sumatran tiger subspecies. Guests can look for either of these majestic beasts prowling their territory on the grounds of the abandoned hunting palace.

The Sumatran tiger SSP isn't the only path Disney uses to care for this endangered species. In 1995, during the development of Disney's Animal Kingdom, The Walt Disney Company established The Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund as a means of channeling funds and attention to the protection of endangered species. In 2008, the fund was rebranded as the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. In 2015, it was rebranded again as the Disney Conservation Fund. Over the course of the Fund's lifetime, it has contributed over \$100 million toward wildlife conservation efforts of a thousand species, typically in the form of grants to nonprofit organizations that are best suited to take care of a specific species.

Additionally, the DCF has aided in protecting over 300 million acres. Its work to protect tigers and other endangered species is to be commended. With the collective effort of the DCF, SSP plans, and rising public awareness of the endangered status of all tigers, the Maharajah Jungle Trek should have plenty of tigers to showcase for years to come.