

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

- SPRING 2025 -



A SEA TURTLE IN NEED

DISCOVERING THE  
CLOUDED TIGER CAT

RESTORING SEA  
OTTERS ALONG THE  
U.S. PACIFIC COAST



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

# A Sea Turtle in Need

*MareCet's efforts have contributed to valuable protections for cetaceans and other wildlife in Langkawi's waters, including securing its international designation as an important marine mammal area. They are also working to establish state-supported speed limit zones for public ferries.*



Jasmine Azizan kept a careful eye on the children as the boat crested another wave. Buzzing with excitement to join MareCet on an ocean expedition, these 36 students from Tuba Island Primary School scanned the shimmering water for signs of dolphins. But the morning's luck had been shallow, with no dolphins spotted around Tuba Island after several hours. Hoping to turn their fortune around, Jasmine's team steered their vessel toward a different section of the Langkawi archipelago, one of MareCet's core dolphin monitoring areas in Malaysia. What they found instead was a strange shape floating in the emerald water. Upon inspection, Jasmine realized it was a distressed green sea turtle struggling to swim. This unexpected encounter quickly turned a routine student trip into a rescue mission.

As MareCet's Education and Outreach Coordinator, Jasmine takes students from across Malaysia on educational sea tours in search of dolphins and other cetaceans. These tours give students an eye-opening glimpse into the world of marine biologists and inspire them to conserve the wildlife in their proverbial backyard. MareCet has several projects centered in Langkawi, where they study and

protect three vulnerable species: Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, Indo-Pacific finless porpoises, and Bryde's whales. Their projects investigate each cetacean's distribution, abundance, and social behavior, and MareCet's findings indicate that Langkawi may be one of the most prominent locations in Southeast Asia to find all three species. Marine mammals and other marine species, like sea turtles, often share the same threats, including entanglement in discarded fishing gear, boat strikes in high-traffic areas, and digestive issues from pollution. In addition to monitoring cetaceans, MareCet develops sustainable solutions with authorities and communities to address human activities that create these threats to all marine life.

When Jasmine's boat pulled close to the floundering sea turtle, which was later named Emelda, it was clear that she could not dive. She was floating in a ferry channel with wounds on her shell, although the cause of her injuries was uncertain. After consulting her colleagues, Jasmine knew that Emelda would not survive without immediate help. The team gently lifted Emelda into the boat and informed the students that their tour would need to be cut short. To Jasmine's delight, the children were



**LEFT: MARECET TAKES SCHOOLCHILDREN ON EDUCATIONAL OCEAN TOURS TO TEACH THEM ABOUT MARINE MAMMALS. ABOVE: THE MARECET TEAM RESCUES AN INJURED EMELDA FROM THE WATER AND TRANSPORTS HER TO SHORE FOR TREATMENT.**

happy to lend assistance, taking turns pouring seawater over Emelda's carapace to prevent it from drying out.

MareCet carried Emelda to shore and transferred her to the care of Underwater World Langkawi (UWL), who could provide treatment in their facilities. UWL has taken in distressed sea turtles found by MareCet in the past; upon examining Emelda, they found that in addition to her wounds, she had also consumed a lot of trash. This may have contributed to her buoyancy problem. They provided her with intensive

care and members of MareCet visited Emelda during her recovery. After three weeks under UWL's supervision, Emelda began submerging again and was released back into Langkawi after two more months of rehabilitation.

Rescuing Emelda was not a part of Jasmine's itinerary, but MareCet's intervention showed these students the importance of conservation actions and collaborations between conservation groups to keep oceans safe not just for marine mammals, but for all marine life. ■

# Discovering the Clouded Tiger Cat

When Tadeu de Oliveira's colleague asked him to examine photos of a small cat seen in an Ecuadorian forest in 2009, something did not add up. It was unlike any cat species previously seen in that region, yet it closely resembled two species that he was quite familiar with—the Atlantic forest tiger cat and the savanna tiger cat, both found in Brazil. Intrigued by this new cat's spotted fur patterns, which were noticeably distinct from either tiger cats', Tadeu had a hunch that there was more to uncover about this mystery cat. He and his peers would chew on this mystery for over a decade, until a new species—the clouded tiger cat—was formally recognized in 2024.

Conservationists like Tadeu must regularly navigate the limitations of available knowledge. He leads the Tiger Cats Conservation Initiative (TCCI), a partner of the Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation, and is an authority on the species. Tiger cats are rarely witnessed in the wild, making them remarkably difficult to study and conserve. Prior to trail cameras, it was nearly impossible to see them, let alone notice variations between them. As this game-changing technology proliferated over the years, it enabled TCCI to study the unique characteristics of every tiger cat recorded across the Americas. When he received photos of tiger cats in Ecuador and Colombia with longer tails, differently sized ears, and distinct spot patterns from those in Brazil, Tadeu was certain that a third species had been identified. But more proof was needed, so TCCI's partners held a genetic analysis of different tiger cat scat and blood samples. This study verified that a new species, the clouded tiger cat, had been hidden in plain sight.

To raise awareness for tiger cats, TCCI succeeded in getting the species named as the official symbol of the Brazilian state of Maranhão, and had traffic signs placed along roadways to prevent vehicle collisions with tiger cats crossing between fragmented habitats.

The study also revealed something concerning. For years, it was believed that tiger cats existed across northern South America. Using cameras deployed across 60 sites, TCCI created an updated map of the three tiger cats' distribution, learning that each species did not share one giant connected range, but three smaller, separate ranges. Atlantic forest and savanna tiger cats live almost exclusively in Brazil, while clouded tiger cats have a long, narrow range through high-altitude cloud forests from Central America to Bolivia. Staggeringly, the new map slashed the total ranges of all three species by roughly 50%. Insights like the updated distribution map, and the clouded tiger cat's very discovery, are essential for TCCI to raise awareness and adapt their efforts to protect these threatened cats.

Despite their distinct characteristics, all three tiger cats share the same threats. To prevent retaliation against tiger cats due to livestock predation, TCCI improves henhouses among nearby communities. To prevent disease transmission from domestic animals, TCCI and their partners vaccinated over 3,000 domestic dogs and cats from Mexico to Chile. TCCI is advocating for state laws to make vaccinations mandatory and to protect more tiger cat habitat from agricultural development. Tadeu's team also monitors deforestation, wildfires, and other habitat threats using satellite imagery.

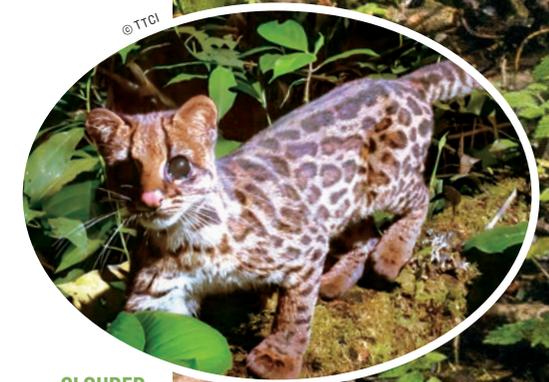
After years spent unraveling the mysteries of tiger cats, Tadeu shows no signs of slowing down. The clouded tiger cat's recent discovery shows the value of thorough research—and hunches—when crafting effective conservation strategies. ■



ATLANTIC FOREST TIGER CAT



SAVANNA TIGER CAT



CLOUDED TIGER CAT

A CLOUDED TIGER CAT IN COSTA RICA.

# Restoring Sea Otters

## Along the U.S. Pacific Coast

Visit [seaotterfund.org](https://seaotterfund.org)  
for more information.

One of the world's smallest and most beloved marine mammals, sea otters are an iconic species that can be seen weaving through the waves and floating in raft-like groups along limited stretches of the U.S. Pacific Coast. But centuries ago, these playful animals were nearly hunted to extinction for their fur. Today, they remain absent from a substantial portion of their former range.

To help this species return, the Wildlife Conservation Network is launching the **Sea Otter Fund**—our first marine-focused Wildlife Fund—whose vision is to restore sea otters along their historical U.S. Pacific Coast range. The Fund will support the conservation groups, scientists, Tribes, government agencies, and community leaders who are advancing sea otter reintroduction while aligning with local community priorities. By funding scientific research and technical planning, the Sea Otter Fund will create strong foundations for successful sea otter reintroductions.

The Sea Otter Fund represents a tremendous opportunity to support the movement to restore a keystone species and revitalize coastal ecosystems. We hope you will join us in this exciting initiative. ■



WCN has recently launched  
the **Sea Otter Fund!**  
Learn more at  
[seautterfund.org](http://seautterfund.org)

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WCN protects endangered wildlife by supporting conservationists who ensure wildlife and people coexist and thrive.

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