

Project Update: August 2016

Peak Wilderness Area

Camera trapping successfully began in early August 2016. For the first round, nine estate locations were selected and 12 total stations set up. The first week saw glorious weather and setting up was done in good conditions for the most part. However towards the latter stages unusual rains for the region set in bringing with it infamous leeches galore!! Checking of traps meant moving through wet vegetation and tea bushes in pouring rain with a multitude of leeches clinging on to you – a task not for the faint of heart.

However the pay-off has been well worth the effort as we have in this first round been able to establish the movement pattern of a resident male (Figure 1) and establish three females (one with cub) in this area already. Reconnaissance work has already begun for the next round of locations and many estate managers communicated with and site visits begun. Round 2 will commence in the first weeks of September.

Working in this Central Hills region and in the Bogawanthalawa Valley area bordering Peak Wilderness specifically, where no work has been done prior to this project, is quite thrilling; and although work is much harder than for example in the Wilpattu National Park, the rewards of seeing the elusive leopard here in this mixed landscape and getting a picture of its movement patterns in this diverse and misty surroundings is definitely worthwhile (Figure 2). We have also successfully been able to accumulate a good sample size of leopard scat for diet and hopefully genetic analysis. Also of import is the establishment and documentation of the other of Sri Lanka's wildcats in this region together with general mammal biodiversity captured on the remote cameras (Figure 3). We are also assisting in a forest restoration project at one of the nearby estates and it is hoped that this will be replicated in other estates too, informed by the leopard movement patterns this project will be able to establish.



Figure 1. Resident Adult Male (appropriately named Arnold by our field assistants) photo captured on a misty evening.



Figure 2. Views of the study site areas; Eucalyptus trees, tea bushes and forest make up this mixed misty and wild landscape. Our field truck in the back ground.



Figure 3. A fishing cat, Sri Lanka's second largest cat photo captured at one of the camera stations.

Awareness

Continuing with our awareness work in this region, especially with a focus on educating and addressing the local tea estate workers and their concerns and the importance of wild habitat, seven targeted programmes covering four estates were conducted in May 2016 and a further three in July/August 2016. A total of 275 tea workers were addressed in the former programme and had the participation of regional government wildlife department staff and area police together with our team (Figure 4). The

July/August programmes addressed 140 tea related workers and we have had requests for more programmes. A trilingual leaflet titled 'Living with Wildcats' was created and distributed widely (Figure 5). This pamphlet reminds people of the simple solutions that can be carried out as part of daily life in order to avoid incidents with leopards. We continue to carry out these programmes as we move through the estates and work closely with Department of Wildlife Conservation field staff and estate management to ensure co-existence between human and wildlife is fostered.



Figure 4. Awareness programmes conducted with i). local area police, estate management and field staff; 2). male field workers and 3). female tea pluckers in the field.



Figure 5. Living with Wildcats trilingual pamphlet created specifically for addressing problems with human wildcat interactions.