Project Update: June 2016

Wilpatu National Park

We are happy to report that our Wilpatu closed population leopard camera trap survey has successfully been completed and leopard population analysis complete. Using the standard secr analysis for capture-recapture surveys we now have an estimated leopard population density for Wilpatu NP together with sex ratios and some home range information for the study site. The leopard population density is recording lower than our Yala National Park study and it records higher than the density for Horton Plains National Park that was obtained during our closed population camera trap study there in 2012. These numbers are in line with the prey availability that is recorded and expected for these areas; whereby the study site with higher prey base is showing higher leopard densities.

Detailed prey analysis for Wilpattu is ongoing and should be completed shortly. Together with the leopard population data (and possibly diet analysis if lab work is completed in time; field samples are still being collected) will be written up for publication soon.

A public lecture was given earlier this month to a packed audience and the presentation of the study results was extremely well received with a lot of positive feedback and student and volunteer requests to work with WWCT.

Peak Wilderness Area

We have unfortunate news to report from this study area; 10 leopards have been killed during the course of this year alone in areas close to and adjacent to Peak forests. Much of our time has been spent dealing with this situation together with the Department of Wildlife Conservation and attempting to better understand why this is occurring and also implementing preventative measures such as awareness programmes and immediate habitat solutions to discourage leopards from coming close to human habitation. This area is a mixed matrix of tea estates, eucalyptus and pinus plantations, released tea and grasslands together with ridge forest. Interspersed amidst this landscape are small communities of tea plantation workers homes. Our focus for the next months is the surveying of these forest patches in this valley together with the accessible edge of Peak Wilderness sanctuary to better understand the movement patterns of leopards frequenting this landscape. We hope that this information will help formulate and better direct conservation land use planning so as to prevent or lessen leopard deaths occurring.

Camera trapping is set to begin in August 2016. Heavy rains resulting in floods and landslides in the central hill areas have delayed our start.

DNA Analysis

The finalised list of items as well as the sourcing of them from relevant companies is complete and the order for them placed. These materials are unavailable locally and have to be ordered in. Once the items are received, laboratory trials for optimisation from existing scat samples will begin.

Our continued work via this project in these mixed landscape areas will reveal the movement corridors and connections these leopards are utilising. Leopard deaths and human-leopard incident reduction is also an important focus of this work. It is also hoped that if the DNA analysis is successful a better understanding of dispersal success and population structure between the central hills and the lowlands of the island will be gained.