

Persian Leopard Newsletter



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THE PERSIAN LEOPARD NEWSLETTER IS BACK!

Inspired by the Persian calendar’s “Year of the Leopard”, in 2010 the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) launched a campaign to raise awareness about the dire status of Endangered Persian leopards in Iran. Iran has always been perceived as the leopard stronghold in Western Asia. However, sadly, the long-term survival of Iranian leopards is worrisome given the ongoing escalated rate of habitat and prey loss coupled with extensive human-leopard conflicts, affecting the leopard populations across the country. The “Persian Leopard Newsletter” was published during 2010-2011 to present ICS activities focusing on the conservation of the Persian leopard in Iran.

We are now delighted to inform you that the Persian Leopard Newsletter is back! Although the Year of Leopard has passed, our goals have remained unchanged. As before, this newsletter will serve as ICS’ communication and awareness tool; not only to bring you a first-hand picture of our conservation efforts in Iran, but also to draw international attention to the enigmatic Persian leopards. We received a lot of positive feedback from the previous issues of the newsletter, which is a source of motivation for us. Please keep your comments coming in: persianleopard@wildlife.ir. As always we welcome all your suggestions!

FOUR LEOPARDS CAPTURED IN ONE SHOT!

On 2 July 2014, the Khuzestan Department of the Environment released exciting video footage of four leopards taken by a local warden in the Shimbar Protected Area, southwestern Iran. The poor quality of images extracted from the original footage makes it challenging to clearly assign sex and/or age to each individual. However, at least one female leopard with two cubs is among the four leopards filmed! This rare record is one of very few confirmed evidences of leopard occurrence in Khuzestan Province of Iran, along the borders with Iraq.



Photo: S. Hashemi/Khuzestan DoE



Photo: S. Hashemi/Khuzestan DoE



Photo: A. Tak Tehrani

DEBATE ON LEOPARD vs. PREY INTERACTIONS

On 18 May 2014, a talk was given to present a recent scientific paper on the Persian leopard and its prey in northeastern Iran, which was published in the April 2014 issue of the **European Journal of Wildlife Research**. Attended by more than 40 Iranian scholars, the paper’s findings were discussed by the principal author Mohammad Farhadinia. The leopard’s main prey, i.e. urial wild sheep has been subject to legal harvest through a state-based trophy-hunting scheme for decades. However, predation by natural predators, especially the leopards, has never been understood in the country. This is a crucial component for any future management plans.



Photo: M. Pourmirzai

BAKU SUMMIT BROUGHT NEW HOPES FOR PERSIAN LEOPARDS IN THE CAUCASUS

On 7 May 2014, a summit co-organized by the International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA) and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation brought international and regional experts to the Republic of Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku to discuss conservation solutions for the vanishing leopards of the Caucasus region. Together with a delegation from the Iran Department of the Environment and another Iranian NGO, ICS experts Mohammad Farhadinia and Ehsan Moqanaki represented Iran at this event. Attendance of acclaimed international experts and representatives of world's leading conservation organizations such as IUCN, WWF, ZSL, Smithsonian Institution, Panthera, and IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, together with the great hospitality of our Azeri hosts, made this event a unique opportunity to discuss ideas for future regional collaboration on behalf of the Persian leopard. With rough estimates of fewer than 60 individuals, Persian leopards in the Caucasus are critically endangered. Regional efforts to save this subspecies from extinction were launched nearly a decade ago, yet the long-term survival of leopards in the Caucasus is not promising. The Republic of Azerbaijan, located in the Southern Caucasus, is thought to host a small population of around 12 leopards mainly along the borders with Iran.



Photo: E. van Maanen



Photo: E. van Maanen

MINI-CONFERENCE AT IRAN DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The Iranian Cheetah Society's research and conservation activities for Persian leopards in the Iranian Caucasus were the focus of a mini-conference organized by the Iran Department of Environment (DoE) held on May 4, 2014. Hosted by the Deputy of Natural Environment and Biodiversity and Head of Biodiversity and Wildlife Bureau, ICS experts shared with DoE representatives their concerns about the status of Persian leopards in the Iranian Caucasus on the basis of results of several case studies they have been carried out across the region. Coinciding with the Baku Summit, the Iran DoE managers stressed their commitment to support efforts to conserve leopard populations in the Iranian Caucasus.

To date, ICS experts have led four field-based conservation projects across the Caucasian region of Iran, including projects dealing with the status assessment of leopards in priority leopard reserves, working with local people to understand their attitude toward the Persian leopard as well as identifying the underlying causes of current human-leopard conflicts.



Photo: M. Eslami

CONFLICT ASSESSMENT OF PERSIAN LEOPARD-LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN ALAMUT

Alamut, renowned for its legendary Assassins in historic times, is located on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains to the south of the Caspian Sea. For a long time, Alamut with its high mountains and difficult-to-access terrain provided shelter and hiding places for fugitives. Nowadays human settlements have occupied Alamut's valleys because of abundant water resources. The significant fauna and flora of Alamut, including the Persian leopard, have led to the declaration of a new reserve within this region.

Given the remarkable presence of local communities within leopard habitat in Alamut, it is not surprising that leopard-human conflict has been always an issue in this area. During the past few years, there have been several reports of livestock depredation by leopards and retaliatory killings by local residents in response. In order to explore the main reasons promoting such conflicts and to understand people attitudes toward leopards, Leila Halakouhi, an ICS biologist, did her master's project on human dimensions of leopard-local community interactions in Alamut.

After more than seven months of interviews with local informants and residents, Leila has found that most respondents claim an unfavorable increase in leopard numbers in Alamut because of the declaration of the new reserve. Although the respondents' generally expressed positive attitudes toward "wild" leopards, ironically, they claimed those problematic leopards stalking their livestock are "tamed" leopards released by local wildlife authorities! Meanwhile, respondents expressed their opinion that incentive payments provided by local authorities are insufficient to recover their losses.

With an apparent increase in human-leopard conflicts across Iran, many local communities attribute this trend to conservation efforts by local authorities, and neglect more realistic local reasons such as depletion of wild prey. Clearly, a better understanding of patterns of human-leopard conflicts and their underlying causes can help in the future to pick the best local solutions to the problem.



Photo: L. Halakouhi



Photo: M. Khakpour/Qazvin DoE



Photo: L. Halakouhi

HOPE AFTER EARLY DISAPPOINTMENT IN SOUTHEASTERN IRAN

Following 18 months of camera trapping in southeastern Iran, a leopard was finally photo-trapped in April 2014 in Darband-Ravar Wildlife Refuge, Kerman Province. Two separate leopard images from two stations (8 km apart) from opposite angles did not confirm the number of leopards, but morphological features support the hypothesis that these photos are of a single individual, an adult female. Due to extensive presence of drug smugglers moving between Pakistan and Iran, this reserve is not a safe place for large-scale fieldwork. Thus, ICS experts found only a small proportion of the area secure enough to deploy the camera traps. So far, more than 25 stations across the vast area of 14,000 km² have been equipped with camera traps, as part of a survey initiated in 2012 by ICS and the local authority. Both Panthera and the Conservation of Asiatic Cheetah Project (CACP) have also contributed to this study through provision of 15 camera traps. While the final goal was, and still is, to confirm the presence of Asiatic cheetahs, the team members were excited to see the leopard after months of concerted efforts.

A local camel herder, who has experienced many encounters with both cheetahs and leopards in our study site including having several of his camels killed by leopards, is a member of the project team. His knowledge of these large felids helped the ICS team to find proper locations to deploy camera traps. In Novem-

ber 2013, the herder was presented a prize due to his dedication to the area and conservation work despite his economic loss, by the country's Vice President in the ICS annual celebration for local conservation practitioners and game wardens.



Photo: Iranian Cheetah Society/Iran DoE/CACP/Panthera



Photo: Iranian Cheetah Society/Iran DoE/CACP/Panthera

LEOPARD GUARDIANS AWARDED!

Five local wardens received the first round of the "Yahya Prize" in a ceremony at the University of Environment, Karaj, on 12 June 2014. Supported by Mojtaba Ramzi and Parvin Moshkzad, a talented artist couple collaborating with ICS since 2002, Mojtaba and Parvin have devoted part of their income selling their sculptures to protecting Iranian wildlife. Inspired by the heart-breaking story of Yahya Shahk-

ouh-Mahalli, a committed chief warden murdered by poachers in 2007 in northeastern Iran, the Yahya Prize is born as an annual awards ceremony to acknowledge the wardens' exceptional efforts to save Iran's natural heritage. The first prizes were awarded to wardens who had received severe injuries in confrontations with wildlife poachers during 2013. Interestingly, all the award-winning wardens work in leopard reserves

in the northern and western part of the country. Since 1980, poachers in Iran have murdered at least 120 wardens, and many more have been injured.



Photo: M. Pourmirzai



Photo: M. Pourmirzai





DEAD LEOPARDS FOUND IN A KEY CHEETAH RESERVE

In mid-May 2014, the remains of a young leopard were found by the game wardens in the Bafq Protected Area. The leopard, apparently a cub, was found far from human settlements, supporting the hypothesis that the animal died due to non-human causes. Early this year, another leopard was reported poached by local people near a village at western boundary of the reserve based on an image taken by a cell phone. The leopard's body was never found, probably removed by poachers. Retaliation as a result of livestock depredation was suspected to be the main reason for this leopard's killing.

In 2012, after a systematic camera trapping survey in the area by ICS in partnership with the Yazd Depart-

ment of Environment, CACP and Panthera, 11 different leopards were detected, including two different families (female leopards with cubs). Among identified individuals, an adult male was regularly photo-captured across the entire area -an area of more than 500 km² of rolling mountains- which was estimated to be at least 12 years old.

Located in central Iran, Bafq Protected Area is one of the well-known reserves for the Persian leopards across arid parts of the country. With an area of 850 km², the area has been hosting years of monitoring efforts by ICS targeting the Persian leopard and Asiatic cheetah.



Photo: A. Khajeh/Yazd DoE



Photo: Anonymous



Photo: Iranian Cheetah Society/Iran DoE/CACP/Panthera

LEOPARD PREY SPRING COUNT IN NORTHEASTERN IRAN

Annual census programs were implemented in early June 2014 in both Sarigol and Salouk National Parks, in northeastern Iran. With participation of more than 30 game wardens and students, one-day trips were organized to find tracks and count ungulates, mainly urial wild sheep, the staple prey of leopards in the region. No significant change was obvious in prey populations compared to previous years, and more than 2,500 individual urials were counted in both Parks. As part of a project run by ICS and the University of Oxford's WildCRU since 2013, prey demographic assessments have been identified as a top priority to evaluate ongoing conservation measures which was accomplished through active involvement of the

project team members with the existing efforts by the Iran Department of Environment's annual game count.

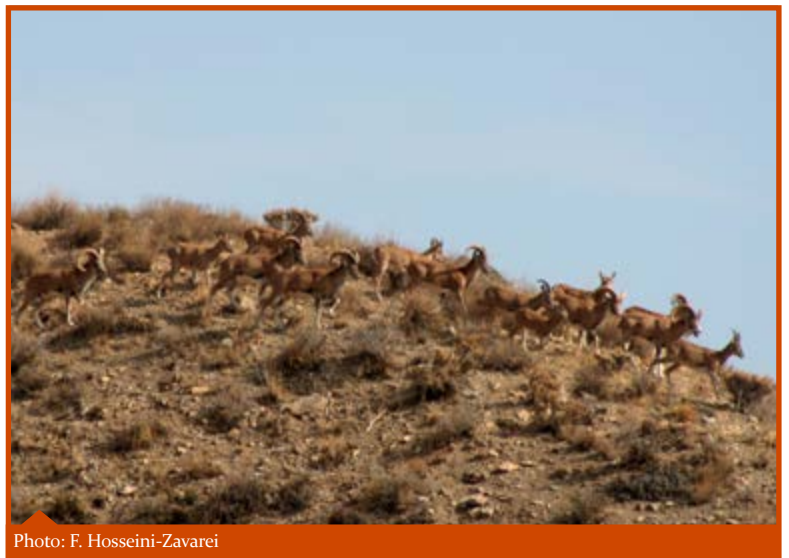


Photo: F. Hosseini-Zavarei

A TRIBUTE TO ALBORZ, THE LEOPARD WHO SPARKED PUBLIC ATTENTION TO THE SUBSPECIES DIRE STATUS

The story of a barely alive Persian leopard, shot several times before being rescued by wildlife authorities in northern Iran and the subsequent unsuccessful efforts to save him, went viral in the Iranian media.

It was on January 3, 2014 that local authorities in Tonekabon city of Mazandaran Province were informed of a huge leopard found barely crawling along a river. Rushing to the scene, the local DoE staff found a leopard unable to properly move with one of its forelimbs fractured. Several hours of tough effort were needed to live-capture the leopard at night. The severely injured leopard was then sent to the Pardisan Rehabilitation Center in Tehran to be examined by a team of experienced vets. The story of this male leopard named “Alborz” as a symbol of stamina and innocence, quickly spread in the media and sparked attention of the critical status of leopards in Iran.

Subsequent investigations in Tehran revealed that the exceptionally 115-kg, c. 8-year-old, Alborz had been shot several times during the past years, with the most recent shot penetrating its spinal cord. The fracture in the forelimb was relatively old and apparently was a result of Alborz own attempts to escape a leg-hold trap. Despite all the efforts during the following days to save this leopard, the rescue team found that, unfortunately, the severe spinal cord damage was totally irreversible. The vet team finally decided to euthanize Alborz on 13 January 2014.

Following the death of Alborz, the local wildlife authority identified a father and his son as responsible for shooting the leopard, and both were detained. The father took full responsibility for the incident, and later was convicted by the local court for the killing of Alborz. He was sentenced to six months in prison and the court ordered him to pay restitution for the ecological damage he caused and fined him IRR 50,000,000 (c. USD \$1,600).

Either as a result of an increase in support for wildlife conservation in the country or an increase in human-leopard interactions, or both, human-induced mortality of leopards in Iran has been the center of attention during recent years. Conservationists warn that with no proper records of these incidents and their impact on the local leopard populations, this issue clearly needs immediate conservation attention.



Photo: F. Salehi/ Tasnim News Agency



Photo: A. Shahrđari



Photo: A. Shahrđari





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The Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization devoted to saving the rich but fast disappearing biodiversity of Iran. Carnivores are an essential priority within the ICS activities and various research and conservation projects have been implemented for several species, such as Asiatic cheetah, brown bear, striped hyena, grey wolf, Eurasian lynx, caracal, and Persian leopard, the latter with more than two thirds of its wild population occurring in Iran. The ICS was established in 2001 (registration number 13640) and celebrated its first decade of biodiversity conservation recently.

To learn more about the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) visit: www.wildlife.ir



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