

PERSIAN LEOPARD PROJECT IN IRAN

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While most attention has been given to the plight of the Iran's critically endangered wild cat, the Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*), efforts to conserve the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*), leave much to be desired. Globally known as one of the largest of many subspecies of leopard, this felid is the only «big cat» nowadays surviving in Iran after the extinction of Caspian tiger (*P. tigris virgata*) and Asiatic lion (*P. leo persica*).

Until 40 years ago, the leopard was considered as a common or even pest species throughout Iran by reviewers of the nation's rich biodiversity. Leopards are distributed in diverse habitats in Iran, wherever sufficient prey is present, with the exception of vast plains and cultivated lands. Sporadic reports are received annually on the depredation by leopards on livestock, resulting in poisoning or shooting of the problematic animals. Unfortunately no proper conservation action has been carried out within the country for this «endangered» subspecies and the population is guesstimated to number 550-850 individuals. Due to ever-increasing threats to leopard survival from direct poaching, habitat fragmentation and prey loss, this «protected species» (by Iran's Department of Environment laws) is facing a drastic extirpation in low-density areas.

Since June 2007 research and conservation efforts on leopards in Iran has been coordinated by the «Persian Leopard Project» with the collaboration of international conservationists and scientists from around the world, Plan for the Land Society and the Department of Environment in Iran.

The pilot site of the Persian leopard project is Bamu National Park in Southern Iran which has been leopard habitat for a long time, but is now highly fragmented by human-dominated landscapes. As a first step, the project managed to implement non-invasive scientific methods to assess the status of leopard in Bamu. Since September 2007 a six month intensive camera-trapping survey was carried out. Seven individual leopards were identified through their unique coat pattern and a density of around 1.8 individuals/100 sq km was estimated. This is much higher than previous studies on Amur and Arabian leopard (*P.p. orientalis* and *nimir*) in Russia and Oman, but lower than previous guesstimates on Bamu leopard capacities. Parallel to this, other scientific studies on leopard signs (scrapes, tracks, scat analyses, etc.) and attractants (lures) have been initiated.

These days the project is becoming more conservation-oriented and includes public-awareness in surrounding villages, programmes to raise the awareness of the younger generation and even campaigning in cities to bring

attention to the Persian leopard. Connecting zoos keeping Persian leopard inside Iran and around the world would also help in global campaigning activities. A major threat to larger wildlife in Bamu is the high incidence of poaching in contrast to other protected areas of Iran. High poacher-warden conflicts and lack of motivation of game wardens are reasons behind establishing the «Persian Leopard Trust» among Bamu local communities and game-wardens. Basic educational courses on Bamu biodiversity, wildlife conservation and ecotourism capacities are going to be held with collaboration of international organizations. Equipping this Trust with modern conservation tools and techniques and bonuses on capturing poachers will be indispensable in the future and will need the support of different partners.

After compiling leopard status data and defining the preliminary conservation goals, the Persian leopard action plan for the long-term survival in Bamu National Park will be prepared and endorsed by different parties. Over the next year we will add to our project sites and would definitely welcome collaboration from interested people and organizations.

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Fig1. A camera-trap photo of Cyrus, the dominant male Persian leopard of Bamu National Park (©Plan for the Land Society).



Fig2. A typical landscape of Bamu National Park with a ridge-top route and a leopard scrape, the most common sign of leopard presence (©Taher Ghadirian).