

Asiatic Cheetah in Grave Danger of Extinction

The Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) is in grave danger of extinction and is “hanging on by only the thinnest of threads”, the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has announced.

A press release said it was believed that fewer than 60 existed in the entire Asian continent, most of them on the edge of Iran’s Kavir Desert. The subspecies once ranged from Arabia and Palestine to India.

WCS carried out a survey in September. The team included George Schaller, WCS’s Director of Science, his colleague Tim O’Brien and Ali Reza Jourabchian from Iran’s Department of Environment.

Schaller said afterwards: “Based on our talks with many people and on our own observations, it is clear that the cheetah in Iran is gravely threatened with extinction. Urgent action is needed to offer this species a future. Just as Iran takes pride in preserving its great cultural treasures, it needs to view and treat the cheetah as a great natural treasure”.

The team spent a month surveying three protected areas where cheetahs still exist – Kavir National Park, Khar Touran World Biosphere Reserve and Daranjeer Hunting Prohibited Area – said a WCS press release. They found a variety of suitable habitat, but found that prey species, such as gazelles (*Gazella dorcas* or *bennetti*) and urial sheep (*Ovis orientalis*) were scarce.

In the 1970s, estimates of Iran’s cheetah population ranged from 100 to 400. But the WCS press release said that widespread poaching of cheetahs and their prey during the early years of the 1978 Islamic revolution, along with degradation of habitat due to livestock grazing, had pushed the cheetah to the brink of extinction.

Schaller and O’Brien were encouraged by the dedication and commitment of the Department of Environment staff to improve conditions in the protected areas. The release said that the sprawling Khar Touran area had only 20 park guards to patrol more than 5,400 square miles (8,640 square kilometres). As a result thousands of head of livestock illegally graze in its core area.

The WCS plans to carry out a comprehensive census next year of cheetahs and other predators, including leopards and wolves, and it looks forward to the possibility of other projects to help protect Iran’s diverse flora and fauna.

Source

WCS press release 31 October 2001.