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Abstract: An agreement for cooperation to investigate the status of the critically-endangered Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) and to prepare conservation measures has been reached between the Department of Environment of Iran, the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, and the Institute of Zoology of Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany.

## Asiatic Cheetah in Iran

**A**n agreement for co-operation to investigate the status of the critically-endangered Asiatic cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus venaticus* and to prepare conservation measures has been reached between the Department of Environment of Iran, the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, and the Institute of Zoology of Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany. Detailed surveys to map the distribution of cheetahs and associated wildlife, especially gazelles, and to assess the status of wild habitats are about to start, leading to recommendations to the Department of Environment for conservation of the cheetah as part of the country's biodiversity. An educational and public awareness campaign, based on the cheetah, but encompassing the need for environmental conservation for the benefit of people, will be carried out.

The Asiatic cheetah once ranged from Arabia to the Indian subcontinent, through Iran, central Asia, and Afghanistan. In Iran and the subcontinent, it was numerous. Cheetahs were easy to train, and rulers kept huge numbers for hunting gazelles. The Moghul Emperor of India, Akbar, is said to have had 1,000 at a time. It appears in many Persian and Indian miniature paintings. But by 1900 it was already headed for extinction in many areas. The last physical evidence of cheetahs in India was three shot (with two bullets) by the Maharajah of Surguja in 1947 in eastern Madhya Pradesh. By 1990, cheetahs appeared to survive only in Iran. Estimated to number over 200 during the 1970s, current estimates by Iranian biologist Hormoz Asadi put the number at 50-100 (Asadi, 1998).

Iran had an active wildlife conservation programme in the 1970s, but, following the Islamic Revolution in 1978, reserves were invaded by livestock, which overgrazed the land, while both cheetahs and their principal prey, gazelles, were ruthlessly hunted, resulting in a rapid decline. As a result, the Asiatic cheetah is now listed as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals (1996).

Initial surveys in the latter half of 1997 show that urgent action is required to rehabilitate wildlife populations, especially gazelles, and their habitat if the cheetah is to survive (Asadi, 1998).

As a top predator, at the peak of food chains, the cheetah serves as a flagship for conservation efforts beneficial for biodiversity throughout its range. The project is scheduled to last three years. Funds are being sought to provide for equipment, including two four-wheel drive vehicles and running costs, field equipment, (such as binoculars, telescope, night-viewer,

camera, laptop computer), travel, communications, accommodation and food, and salaries for the principal investigator and assistants.

### Visit to Iran

When I visited Tehran in January, officials showed eagerness for foreign collaboration. I was taken to the Kavir National Park (609,000 ha.) 3-4 hours drive south of Tehran, where we lodged in a 500-year-old caravanserai, prepared for modern visitors, near the foot of the Siah Kuh (Black Mountains). There is a second, smaller, caravanserai for women, at a respectable distance from the main one.

We spent three hours driving during the night with spotlights, but saw only one fox, probably Rüppel's fox *Vulpes rüppeli*. There were no hares *Lepus capensis*, which are known cheetah prey, or other wildlife.

In the morning, the Siah Kuh filled the southern horizon, streaked with snow. The foothills were of many colours, from dull white to reds and greens. The stony plain was covered with knee-high artimesia bushes. We drove to the foot of the mountains, where there was a stream used by wild sheep *Ovis orientalis* and goats *Capra aegragus*, which are taken by cheetahs. I thought that might be because of the few gazelles, but was told they were normal cheetah prey in Iran. The area was filled with tall phragmites, sere with the winter season. Except for a speck on a high slope which was said to be an ibex *Capra ibex*, there was no life to be seen. However, we came upon some animal tracks. They could have been left by a cheetah, but we decided that they were more probably made by a wolf.

The chief park official, Miran Zade, said he reckoned the park might hold about 14

cheetahs. The thousands of gazelles which used to be found there, and provided cheetahs with their main food, were nearly all gone because of poaching. The cheetahs frequent the rocky lower slopes of the Siah Kuh, where they feed on wild sheep. Miran Zade recounted a surprising record of surplus killing, perhaps the first involving cheetah. One day he spotted two cheetahs lying on a ledge over a stream with steep sides. When they moved away he went to the spot and found 14 wild sheep lying dead below. Some had been partially eaten, but most had only canine teeth marks on the throat where the cheetahs had throttled them. The narrow gorge probably penned in the sheep, which panicked when the cheetahs made their first attack, leading to the frenzied killing.

Some mountain goats were seen, though very distant and high up as they climbed to a ridge. At another place, Miran drew attention to some distant specks which he said were gazelles, either goitred *Gazella subgutturosa* or dorcas *G. dorcas*.

A flock of pintail sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*, a pair of ravens *Corvus corax* and an unidentified finch were the only birds seen.

### Captive cheetah

In Tehran, the Department has a young female cheetah, taken as a cub in Yazd when her mother was killed by local people in 1995. She has an extensive enclosure (much of it covered with snow when I was there) and appeared to be in excellent health. She is being fed live rabbits, although they provide no substitute for the exercise she would get chasing hares in the wild. However, when offered a rabbit in my presence, she twittered and raced to grab it, after which she raced round and round the enclosure with it in her mouth before settling down to eat.

It was interesting to see a cheetah in the snow. In the wild in Iran, they endure temperatures from well below 0° C in winter to 45° C in mid-summer.

Hormoz Asadi has been observing her behaviour and has prepared a draft report (Asadi, 1997).

### Conclusion

The cheetah in Iran has to be viewed in the broad scene of the natural environment and its wildlife. There has been extensive deterioration of habitat through over-grazing by livestock. A million licensed guns, for which hunters are given 300 rounds a year, plus a probable two million more illegally

held, represent a grave threat to all wildlife, including the cheetah and its main prey, gazelles. Protected areas have suffered from livestock invasion, and the owners see cheetahs as a threat to be eliminated whenever the opportunity occurs. In addition, cheetahs are known to have collapsed and died as a result of pursuit by people in cars and on motorcycles. Guards are too few to provide protection.

Given the situation, the cheetah is in dire straits in Iran, but all is not lost. The Department of Environment, although its resources are meagre, has the organizational structure and is open to international aid. Determined efforts by all concerned can ensure future of this fascinating wild cat. As a charismatic large carnivore, dependent on a vast range and on flourishing gazelle and other wildlife populations, it can serve as the flagship for conservation in Iran.

*Peter Jackson*

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