

SHORT REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF THE ARABIAN LEOPARD, Panthera pardus nimr, IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA.

Sylvain Biguand
National Wildlife Research Center, PO Box 1086
Taif, Saudi Arabia

1. DISTRIBUTION

Several subspecies of Panthera pardus are known in the Middle-east. One of them is endemic to the Arabian Peninsula, Panthera pardus nimr, another endemic to the Sinai Peninsula, Panthera pardus jarvesi, while Panthera pardus tulliana, of Asia Minor reaches Palestine. The Arabian leopard, P.p. nimr is one of the smallest subspecies of Panthera pardus. Only P.p. nimr has been authenticated in Saudi Arabia; indeed, the type specimen of P.p. nimr, was obtained from the region of Al Qunfidhah. But P.p. jarvesi and P.p. tulliana could occur in the northwestern reaches of the peninsula. The pelage of P.p. nimr is distinctively short and close. The coloration characteristic of this race exhibits a marked pallor of the ground color with reduced dorsal darkening, and the pattern of spots strongly contrasts to the small rosettes (Harrison, 1964).

Recent accounts of the leopard distribution in Arabia are lacking. THE Arabian leopard, P.p. nimr, is found in Oman (Mussandam Peninsula), in southern Dhofar (Jebel Samhan, in Sale, 1980); Sanborn & Hoogstraal (cited in Harrison, 1964) stated that leopards were scarce but widespread in Yemen in 1935. Gasparetti et al (1985) acknowledged its endangered status in the Asir and called for urgent protection if it is to be saved from extinction.

Our recent survey by interviews in the field covered the mountainous regions from Madina to Najran and showed that leopards are scarce and probably now restricted to inaccessible areas (Biguand, Biguand-Guyat, Boug, 1989). It is probably also present north of Madina but also in low density. During the surveys, several regions spread across all surveyed ranges (border of Yemen to Madina) have been identified from inquiries as refuges for leopards. Our inquiry data draws the most recent picture of leopard distribution but no leopards were actually observed. The most recent sightings are recorded 2 years ago, giving hope that the leopard is indeed still roaming the Asir and Hijaz mountains.

2. POPULATION

No accurate data is currently available however numbers would be quite low in Saudi Arabia. In Oman recent talks and correspondence with Ralph Daly and Michael Gallagher showed that leopards are threatened in Mussandam area (East of the state)

while relatively more protected in Jabal Samhan (Dhofar) because of the very difficult terrain. Five specimens were trapped several years ago in Samhan for the Sultan's breeding center; two are still living at the center. We have no recent information on the status of the leopard in Yemen.

3. HABITAT

The Arabian leopard seems to be quite tolerant as it concerns habitat. Our inquiries in Saudi Arabia report that leopards were seen recently from the western foothills of the Asir and Hijaz (400 m) to the highest mountains of the range (2600 m), and in a variety of habitat (from Acacia open scleromorphic woodlands to the Juniperus cloud forest). Most reports are concentrated on the west side of the North-South mountain ridge.

4. THREATS

The Arabian leopard is hunted over all its range because it attacks domestic animals. Gasparetti et al (1985) reports that they are even tracked to their lair, walled in with stone and cement, and left to starve. They are frequently killed in Dhofar on a scale that puts their long term status in doubt (Sale, 1980). In Yemen, they are subject to organized hunts, and pitfalls traps are used (Sanborn & Hoogstraal, 1953, in Harrison, 1964). Our inquiries indicate that farmers used to kill leopards by hiding at night in the vicinity of animals presumably killed by a leopard (camels, cows or donkeys). Hunters meeting leopards by chance would usually not shoot because tradition says that a wounded leopard will return at night looking for the unskilled man.

Complete leopard skins were still sold in Abha market less than 10 years ago, and leopard fat is famous for a variety of medical uses (tiger balm). Actually these "traditional" uses of leopard products are now disrupted because leopard density makes the kills rarer.

5. RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION MEASURES

The Arabian leopard is protected, as are all wild animals because hunting with firearms is banned (with limited success). The National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development (NCWCD) policy concerning the leopard is:

1. Determine its status in the wild, its past and present distribution, status in captivity, and the extent to which they are a problem through predation on livestock.
2. Take measures to obtain breeding stocks of the species for retention in captivity to prevent the extinction of the species.

3. Determine the suitability of existing or proposed areas for supporting wild populations of leopards, and (provide) full protection in those areas where it occurs.

As a research center of the NCWCD, the National Wildlife Research Center in Taif is entrusted to lead leopard status assessment. As such, its objectives are the following:

- Define the habitat and actual distribution of the leopard in Asir and Hijaz.
- Analyze the diet of leopard from feces samples. ~~Amount~~ ^{Among} the species common in Arabia the leopards could eat are porcupines, hyraxes, baboons, feral dogs, domestic livestock, etc. Among the less common are gazelles and ibex.
- Develop public awareness. Information and directives for conservation will be directly dispatched during the surveys to implement immediate protection.
- Initiate radio tagging and tracking to assess range size and variability.

Management policy will be defined after this basic research is accomplished.

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INTERNATIONAL LEOPARD STUDBOOK

1989

INTERNATIONAL LEOPARDZUCHTBUCH

МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ ПЛЕМЕННАЯ КНИГА ЛЕОПАРДОВ

Published by

Herausgegeben

Издатель

Alan H. Shoemaker

Riverbanks Zoological Park

PO Box 1060

Columbia, SC 29202 USA

FAX (803) 256-6463