
Keywords: 4IN/leopard/Panthera pardus fusca

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**Population trend**

In India, the leopard population dipped low in the 1970s and 1980s but improved subsequently as a result of conservation measures. The counting of tiger and leopard is done every four years in Indian forests, which gives some trend about the changes in distribution and population. As per official data, the number increased consistently from about 6,830 in 1993 to 7,890 in 1997 and about 9,850 in 2001. Madhya Pradesh accounts for the highest number of leopards followed by Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa (Anon 2004a).

A study of the leopard population in Gujarat showed that the number grew at an average annual rate of 5.6 percent during the past two decades. Similarly, consistent growth of the species was reported in most Indian states. After critical examination of various data, the trends of population change and official reports of the Government of India, based on leopard counts in 1997 and 2001, a range of 9,800 to 10,400 leopards in 2001 and about 12,000 leopards at present may be reasonable estimates.

**Habitats and density changes with respect to the moistness of forests**

According to a recent report on the forest cover with a canopy density of more than 10%, the total forest cover in India is 675,538 km². Of this area, 630,284 km² is in 25 States and Union Territory which have leopards (Anon 2001). A substantial area in Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal, Uttarakhand and Arunachal is in the high Himalayas where the leopard does not occur. Also, some districts with forest cover do not have leopards. Thus, the leopard does not use a substantial area of these states. Based on the above logic, it can be guessed that about 500,000 km² of India’s forest cover is potential leopard habitat. Of the other 10 States and Union Territories, 7 do not have leopards, whereas occurrence of a few leopards in the other three states is guessed.

Based on rainfall and moistness of forests, leopard supporting states have been classified into four groups:
1. semi-arid region (rainfall less than 100 cm),
2. moderate rainfall region (rainfall between 100 to 155 cm),
3. high rainfall region (rainfall between 150 to 225 cm) and
4. very high rainfall region (rain forests above 225 cm).

In some states, there exists more than one climatic region and major forest types. In such cases, the forest type predominantly found in areas of leopard occurrence is considered.

It has been found that population density in Indian forests declines with increasing rainfall and moistness of forests. Leopard abundance was high in the dry region and low in the moist region. In the semi-arid bio-geographic zone of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana States, population density was 22.1 km$^2$ per leopard (1,505 leopards in 33,273 km$^2$). In dry deciduous forests of 10 states in the Deccan and north India (Table 1), every leopard has forest cover of 48 km$^2$ (6,276 leopards in 301,427 km$^2$). The density further declined to one leopard for every 109.3 km$^2$ in five states - Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In evergreen forests, leopard abundance is very low, with only one leopard occurring in every 204.8 km$^2$ (781 leopards in 159,916 km$^2$) in seven states - five in the northeast, Kerala and West Bengal. There may be some error in the categorization of states, but this analysis indicates a definite trend of decline of populations in areas with increasing rainfall, density and moistness of forests, although other factors also contribute the population distribution.

To examine this trend at state level, distribution of leopard in different habitats and districts is critically examined and analyzed in Gujarat, where leopard occurs in 17 out of 25 districts.

In the semi-arid region of Gujarat, the population density is 7.9 km$^2$ per leopard (817 leopards in 6,457 km$^2$ of forest area). Density is lower in the high rainfall area with dense forests where only one leopard was counted in every 33.3 km$^2$ of forest cover. On average, leopard density in the habitats of Gujarat is about 13.9 km$^2$/leopard, which is higher than any other state in India (Anon. 2001 and Anon 2003).

Factors contributing to population growth

Enforcement of protection measures, including implementation of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, has contributed greatly to detecting poaching and decline in major wildlife. Constitution of a Protected Area network across the country has also improved habitats and increased the leopard population. Public awakening to wildlife has had a significant effect on conservation of forests and wildlife.

Developmental activities may have a negative impact on biodiversity but

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. no</th>
<th>Name of states</th>
<th>Forest cover as per FSI, Dehra Dun, 2001 (area in km$^2$)</th>
<th>Leopard population 2001-02</th>
<th>Density in km$^2$ per leopard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Semi-arid Zone</strong>&lt;br&gt;Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana</td>
<td>33,273</td>
<td>1,505</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Moderate rainfall zone-Tropical deciduous forests</strong>: Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Dadara-Nagar Haveli, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattishgadh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>301,427</td>
<td>6,276</td>
<td>48.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>High rainfall zone-Tropical semi-evergreen /semi-moist region</strong>: Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>135,427</td>
<td>1,241</td>
<td>109.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Very high rainfall zone-Ever green forests/moist region</strong>: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, West Bengal and Kerala</td>
<td>159,916</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>204.8</td>
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<td><strong>Total of leopard’s states</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>630,284</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,844</strong></td>
<td><strong>64.0</strong></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Non leopard states</strong>: Punjab, Andaman &amp; Nicobar, Lakshdweep, Delhi, Panch偃ry, Chandigarh, Daman &amp; Diu, Meghalaya, Manipur, Sikkim</td>
<td>45,254</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>675,538</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,844</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
some agricultural activities provide opportunities and enhanced resources for the leopard. For example, construction of a network of small and medium sized dams during the past three decades has improved availability of water, even during scarcity. The dams, ponds and availability of moisture in the irrigated land have enhanced the abundance of some small animals, which have been easy prey for leopards. Also, irrigated crops, such as sugarcane, have provided shelter and breeding ground for the leopard, and extended its habitat closer to human settlements.

Livestock, especially sheep and goats, are abundant in states of west and northwest India, including Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttaranchal and Himachal, which support 68% of India’s leopard population, livestock, especially sheep and goats, are abundant. There are human settlements in the forests and a good number of seasonal migratory livestock. Many naturalists believe that human settlements in the forests, up to a limited scale, are beneficial for the leopard. The prey base has dwindled in deep forests and caused this extremely adaptable cat to shift its base to fringe areas. It is very convenient for the cat to descend on villages to hunt goats, sheep, cattle, poultry and stray dogs and then withdraw to the hills. The foothills have also become the meeting point for livestock and man. There is a gradual shift now by leopards towards a new prey base (i.e. livestock), which is not only more abundant than its original prey, but also a much softer option. Sugarcane and maize fields have become the seasonal ambush cover for the cat. Thus, a new prey-base and convenient ambush cover in a new hunting ground would be one leopard for every 3.6 km². When analysis is narrowed by excluding forests having no leopards in the district, the density of the leopard would be one leopard for every 3 km² in the main concentration zone of the forest ranges in Baria, Limkheda and Dhanpur talukas in Dahod. In this district, human-leopard concentration is the highest in the state, maybe in the country also, and a total of 52 people were killed and 665 people were injured during past 10 years (1994 to 2003). This density in Baria forests and also in Borivli National Park, near Mumbai is certainly very high, and above the limit of tolerance. In very high concentration areas, the extent of habitat is more than accounted for as leopards shelter in the hill forests in daytime and come down to peripheral villages for food.

The above figures, especially for Protected Areas in India, may not provide a real picture because villages within leopard distribution range are key places for food, but they are not counted as part of leopard habitat. In the absence of appropriate studies, it is difficult to estimate the carrying capacity of an area. However, based on the above records, it can be roughly stated that about 8-10 km² per leopard, depending on the habitat condition, may be the appropriate density for managing leopards in semi-arid and tropical regions having thorn and tropical deciduous forest. In semi-evergreen and evergreen forest, the optimum density of the animal would be less.

### References


Anon. 2004a. Leopard population in India, report Ministry of Environment and Forests, GOI, New Delhi


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**What is the optimum density?**

Some areas of India, have a high concentration of leopards and conflicts with humans are at a critical level. This includes areas such as Baria division in Gujarat State, Borivli National Park on the outskirts of Mumbai (Bombay), and some areas in Uttaranchal State. A high population density of about 40 leopards in 103 km² occurred in Borivli National Park and leopards killed several people in the nearby city in 2003 and 2004. Estimation of the density of leopard in Indian forests has included forested areas with no leopards. Thus, the actual density of the animal in leopard habitats is higher than the figures in Table 1.

In Gujarat, the distribution and concentration of the leopard has been critically examined and estimates of density in forest areas of those districts with leopards calculated. In total forest cover of 13,847 km², 999 leopards were counted. With an average density of 7.2 leopards per 100 km², whereas there are 10.4 leopards for the Protected Areas in the state (349 leopards in 3,345 km² of 11 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries). This showed that leopard concentration is higher in the forests than in the Protected Areas. Among Protected Areas, one leopard has 7.2 km² in Gir National Park; 5 km² of forests in Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary; 8.5 km² in Barda Wildlife Sanctuary; 18.6 km² in Jessore and Balaram & Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuaries and 10 km² in Vansada National Park and Purna Wildlife Sanctuary, and 3 km² in Ratnamahals Wildlife Sanctuary according to the 2002 leopard census.

The highest density of leopard in Gujarat occurs in Dahod district (Baria forest division) where a total of 165 leopards were estimated in about 600 km² of forest in June 2004, an average density of one leopard for every 3.6 km². When analysis is narrowed by excluding forests having no leopards in the district, the density of the leopard would be one leopard for every 3 km² in the main concentration zone of the forest ranges in Baria, Limkheda and Dhanpur talukas in Dahod. In this district, human-leopard concentration is the highest in the state, maybe in the country also, and a total of 52 people were killed and 665 people were injured during past 10 years (1994 to 2003). This density in Baria forests and also in Borivli National Park, near Mumbai is certainly very high, and above the limit of tolerance. In very high concentration areas, the extent of habitat is more than accounted for as leopards shelter in the hill forests in daytime and come down to peripheral villages for food.

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1 Conservator of Forests, Vadodara Circle, Kothi Annex, Building, Rao pura, Vadodara-390015. <hss1954@hotmail.com>