

“In Search for Persian Leopard” won cinema prize

As the Best Documentary Feature of 2011, the ICS' recent documentary, entitled “In Search for Persian Leopard” won Crystal Simorgh in Fajr International Film Festival in Iran. It was the highest eligibility an Iranian wildlife documentary has ever achieved in the country and it can be a milestone to provide community support for effective protection of the Persian leopard in Iran.

Once ranged across a majority of mountains and forests of west Asia, the endangered Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* is still known to occur across large areas of Iran. However, its survival is threatened by various factors, particularly prey depletion which has caused high leopard-human conflict. Accordingly, there is a growing rate of leopard poaching in recent years. Accidental or intentional killing by people drives local extinction of the leopards or reduces their numbers.

With an area of 4,000 km² in northern Iran, Central Alborz Protected Area (CAPA) is one of the oldest reserves in Iran which was designated as a protected area in 1963. However, it suffers from high poaching and habitat disturbance. Since 2006, the area's large carnivores, i.e. the Persian leopard and brown bear *Ursus arctos* have been subject to intensive field investigations by the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS).

Accordingly, it was explored that domestic animals are among the major items which the leopards prey on, and such a high proportion of livestock in the dietary compo-

sition indicates a serious conflict between the leopards and local livestock owners in the area. Based on local inquiries, it was roughly estimated that each month at least 2 livestock (including sheep, goat or occasionally cow) from 10 neighboring villages in CAPA's Golestanak core zone are killed by leopards.

On the other hand, at least 16 leopards have been verified from 2002 through 2011 to be killed by local people, sometimes (n=4) through lacing carcasses with organochlorine pesticides to poison leopards returning to feed on a kill. Since there is no systematic compensation program as well as easy access to agricultural poisons and low level of official protection, it is estimated that annually a minimum of 2 leopards are poached, indicating that Alborz populations are severely affected due to human-caused mortalities.

Therefore, in order to outline the extent of the problem, the ICS decided to produce a documentary. “In Search for Persian Leopard” features hard efforts of a scientific team trying to study an elusive large

cat, the Persian leopard in high altitudes of Alborz. During the movie, while illustrating research skills to study the leopards in mountainous areas, one can understand the difficult life of the top predator in areas where their habitat is encroached by human settlements. Finally, a tragedy occurred during the movie, where a mother with two cubs was killed by poachers, indicating how vulnerable the leopard is.

After six years filming in high altitudes and freezing temperatures, the movie was finalized to attend the 30th Fajr International Film Festival – the most outstanding cinema event in Iran – in 2012 to compete with more than 120 documentaries. Known as Iranian Oscar, Fajr International Film Festival is Iran's annual film festival, held every February in Tehran which attracts huge social attention every year.

The leopard movie was nominated in three out of five items for documentaries, including Best Documentary Feature, Best Director (Fathollah Amiri) and Best Research (Bagher Nezami and Mohammad Farhadinia). Finally, Fathollah Amiri, ICS' Filmmaker received the award in Vahdat Hall designated as Best Documentary Feature on 12 February in Tehran. The documentary has been receiving high level of social attention in Iran from the media and has been broadcasted on national and provincial TV channels several times which is hopefully a significant contribution to increase awareness of the community about the gloomy future of the Persian leopard in the country.

¹ Iranian Cheetah Society

*<msfarhadinia@wildlife.ir>