

2010: A YEAR FOR THE ENDANGERED PERSIAN LEOPARD

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The leopard has lost most of its' historical range throughout Asia with at least five subspecies of Asian leopards on the verge of extinction. The Middle East is home to two endangered and critically endangered subspecies, namely the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*) and the Arabian leopard (*P. p. nimr*).

The Persian leopard meta-population, which once covered the Iranian plateau, Caucasus and Central Asia, is now reduced to a few fragmented areas. This is due in part, to anthropological activity in recent decades. It is known that Iran is the stronghold of the Persian leopard containing almost 65% of the total 871-1290 estimated population, despite this fact this glorious cat has not received any appropriate attention (Kiabi et al. 2002, Khorozyan 2008). Unfortunately the Iranian population is under growing pressure within the country's borders and this is leading the animal closer to extinction. The dependence of adjacent small populations on the Iran's leopard population highlights the necessity of immediate national and international conservation efforts.

Historically Persian leopards existed in most parts of Iran, except along the shores of the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf in the south as well as the Caspian Sea in north. They avoid the centrally located hot deserts of Lut and Kavir. Presently, their range is confined to less-disturbed areas where prey is still available. Based on the latest status assessment of the Persian leopard in Iran, they are confirmed to roam at least 130 areas throughout the country. Their habitats are less fragmented in the northern half of Iran, particularly along the Hyrcanian forests and Khorasan in the northeast. They also occur in patchy habitats in the south which is a serious concern for the species long-term survival. Additionally, the annual mortality rate has increased considerably with at least 30-50 individuals dying each year because of human-animal conflicts (Farhadinia 2010).

Traditionally Iranian culture has had a long association with wildlife which is evident within many traditional rituals. The "12-animals calendar", inherited from the Mongol invasion of the 13th century,



Fig. 1: A male Persian leopard poached at vicinity of Yasuj, Iran. Paws, tail, moustache and eyes are removed probably for traditional medical purposes. © A. Shafaeipour 2009

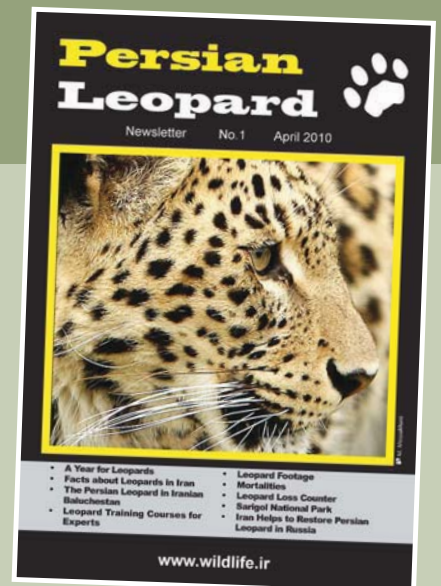


Fig. 2: Persian Leopard Newsletter. Cover Page.

is just an example of this relationship. Although this calendar has now been replaced by Jalali (solar) calendars the animal signs are still thriving as a symbol of the annual ceremonies. Leopard, as the twelfth animal, is the symbol of Iranian New Year (1389) which began in the spring of 2010.

With a history of nearly one decade of big cat conservation in Iran, the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) has enhanced its efforts to celebrate this year for the Persian leopard in order to help to save this vanishing creature. We consider this year to be a great opportunity to increase research efforts on this elusive cat, and deal more significantly with the conservation needs of the species to ensure its survival within the country. In support of this the electronic Persian Leopard Newsletter (PLN) is published to reflect the latest research, news, education, conservation activities and achievements about the species in Iran. PLN is also a network linking experts around the world to provide ideas for standardising schedules and programs which define the priorities of Persian leopard conservation. It is published every two months and will cover all leopard related activities throughout the Year of the Leopard in Iran. The newsletter is available on www.wildlife.ir

References: Full references can be found on website www.wmenews.com



Fig. 3: Female Persian leopard (probably) poisoned by local people in Pol Dokhtar, Lorestan. Carcass of her two cubs found some kilometers away at Golgol. © Lorestan Department of the Environment 2009.