

Persian Leopard



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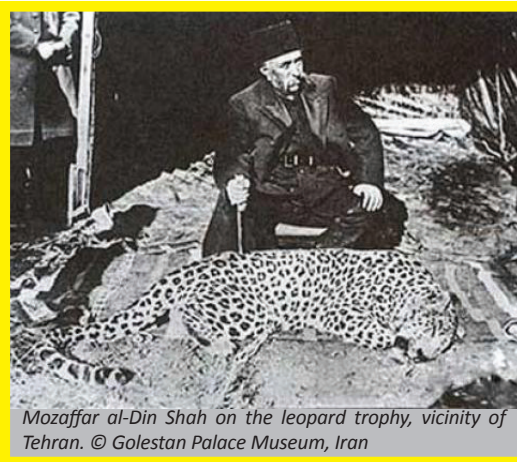
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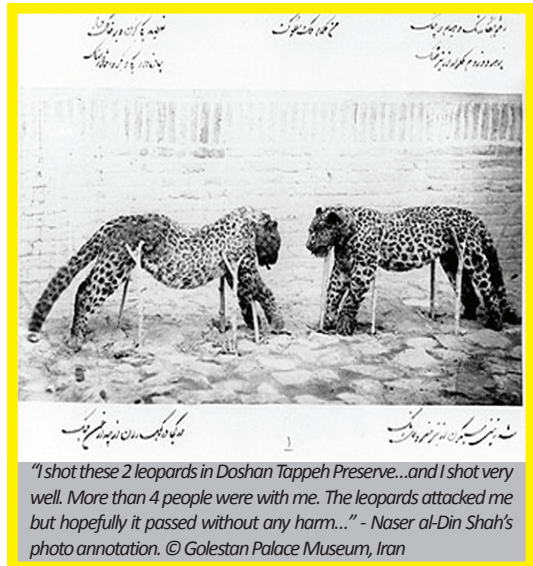
HUNTING A LEOPARD: SYMBOL OF LOYALTY AMONG PERSIAN KINGS

Palang! palang!...and shoot...Being the most common subspecies of large felids in West and Central Asia, the Persian leopard has been hunted severely throughout its range for centuries. Now an endangered subspecies, the majority of the world's Persian leopard lives in Iran. However, poaching along with habitat fragmentation has reduced its populations to fewer than 1000 individuals in west Asia. Besides the Asiatic (Persian) lions which once were considered to be an easier hunt due to obviously asserting their presence and living in open country, leopard hunting has been admired by the erstwhile princely states in Iran (formerly Persia) as a symbol of valor and prestige. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of the hunting as a royal sport for centuries, there is no solid document to show the consequences until the contemporary



Mozaffar al-Din Shah on the leopard trophy, vicinity of Tehran. © Golestan Palace Museum, Iran

era (18th century) which is in accordance with Qajar dynasty. Moreover, the use of far superior fire power and an interest to hunt shared by a much larger number of the royal family. Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831–1896) is the first one who reportedly hunted 45-50 leopards mainly around the capital of Tehran. His son, Mass'oud Mirza Zell-e Soltan (1850–1918), has indicated in his autobiography to hunt 8 Persian leopards himself, followed by much more events by his companions. He is also responsible for hunting more than 37 Caspian Tigers and 30



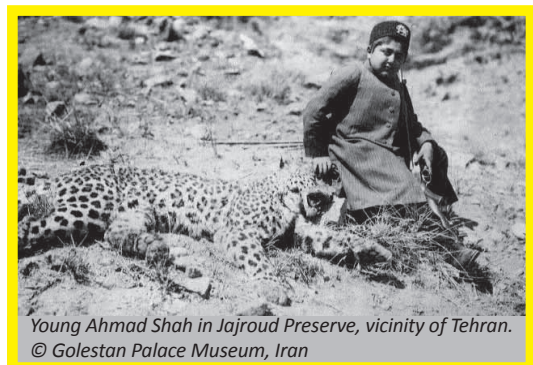
"I shot these 2 leopards in Doshan Tappeh Preserve...and I shot very well. More than 4 people were with me. The leopards attacked me but hopefully it passed without any harm..." - Naser al-Din Shah's photo annotation. © Golestan Palace Museum, Iran

cheetahs in the rituals.

It is not clear whether other Qajar Kings has followed the extensive royal hunting but there are two photos showing Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (1853–1907) and Ahmad Shah Qajar (1898 – 1930) on the leopard trophy.

The royal leopard hunting scientifically reduced in Pahlavi era (1925-1979) - The last royal dynasty in Iran - but it is known that Mohammad Reza Shah has attended in hunting at least 3 leopards at today Khojir National Park, around Tehran.

In recent decades, the leopard is officially protected by law in Iran and no permission is issued by the Iranian government to hunt the largest existing cat in Iran



Young Ahmad Shah in Jajroud Preserve, vicinity of Tehran. © Golestan Palace Museum, Iran

ARE THE PERSIAN LEOPARDS THE **LARGEST** SUBSPECIES?

It has been widely cited within literatures that the leopards from west Asia attain large sizes (e.g. Harrington 1977, Nowell & Jackson 1996, Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). However, the judgment was based on one adult male captured in late 1960s from northern country which could be an exception. Meanwhile, adult males with more than 90 kg were also reported from South Africa (Turnbull-Kemp 1967).

Recently, an extensive research was carried out based on weight of 18 adult male from Iran. They ranged from 44 to 91 kilograms with an average of almost 67 kg. These data confirm that the Persian leopard is on average the largest subspecies of the leopards in the world, heavier than Kruger ($n=8m$, $X=60.6$, Bailey 2005), Thailand ($n=3m$, $X=56.7$, Range=40-70, Rabinowitz 1989), Russia ($n=6m$, Range=32-48, Miquelle et al. 1996), and India ($n=3m$, $X\pm SD=63\pm 13$, Athreya & Belsare 2008).

Moreover, craniometric analysis on Persian leopards skulls from across Iran revealed some outstanding individuals with skull size as large as a female tiger, the largest that has ever been confirmed for the leopards from its entire range (Meijard 2004, Khorozyan et al. 2006).

The research was part of a larger



study on biology and status of the Persian leopard in Iran which has been conducting by the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) since 2005 with partnership of the Iranian Department of the Environment (DoE) and University of Tehran for genetic and craniometric analysis.



TRAINING OF TRAINERS ATTAINED 10%; STILL A LONG WAY ...

Experts in Esfahan Department of the Environment (DoE) attended a training workshop about ecology and status of the Persian leopard. Held on June 16, 2010 in historical city of Esfahan, the workshop was attended by experts from the central office as well as representatives from associated offices where are located near reserves. So far, 10% of the total numbers of Iranian DoEs have been trained through holding educational courses about the Persian leopard.

Meanwhile, a one hour movie was prepared after the workshop based on presented lectures to be distributed among wardens and absent experts together with the workshops presentations.

Due to the Year of Leopard, training of trainers and experts has been a high priority effort for the Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) aiming at improving the present knowledge about the species and how to conserve it more efficiently. The ICS is seeking for possible sources of funding to support the process, as still 90% of the experts need to be covered.



Shahrbaf

LEOPARD FOOTAGE

Tandureh National Park which is located in northeast Iran –near Kopet Dag region– is truly



a hotspot for the leopards in Iran. However, the area is surrounded by several private lands and small villages leading to annual loss due to animal-human conflicts.

In a rare case, a short movie captured showing a leopard attack to a warden. After several reports of depredation on the local people's livestock, eventually the animal was trapped in a cage for translocation into the national park. As the people were angry about the cat, they were throwing objects to the cage and the leopard was getting nervous. Then, the cage was taken inside the park to release the animal. As soon as they opened the cage, the leopard turned back and attacked a warden who was standing on top of a vehicle. He struggled to release his arm from the bite of the leopard, so they felt down together from the roof. At this time the others tried to harass the leopard to go away, which were successful. They took the injured fellow to the hospital to medication and surgery.

PERSIAN LEOPARD CARD

As a part of producing educational materials to spread leopard knowledge across common people, a leopard card was designed focusing on general information about the species current status and main threats to its survival in Iran. Misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about the species are considered to be among the key reasons for fatal human-animal conflicts.



LEOPARDS IN ALAMUT: A PERSECUTED POPULATION

As a revolutionary missionary of a forbidden cult, Sabbah wanted to set his own community on a secretive fortress. Located in central Alborz Mountains – south of the Caspian Sea, the mystery “Alamut” was chosen for activities of the legendary Hashshashins (known to the West as the Assassins). However, only ruins remain of this fortress today but congenial climate, abundant of water sources and available lands have enabled rapid growth of human settlements. On the other hand, there is a significant decline in the local wild ungulate populations in recent years. Nevertheless, there are repetitive reports of the large predators (esp. the Persian leopard) still roaming in the region with an increasing number of conflicts with residents. Being out of the reserve networks, this competition has ended to some dramatic events. Indeed, Alamut was put to attention in 2009, when 4 adult leopards were killed including a female which was expecting her single fetus born in April. When at February 2010 another leopard reported to kill



happen sporadically till May when carcass of a leopard kill was found very close to the village. It became worse when the animal spotted carrying a cub in her mouth. With setting 2 camera-traps on the kill, local experts from Qazvin Department of the Environment (DoE) captured pictures of an adult female leopard. Alternatively, people were scared of the animal attack and avoid going out alone. The risk of any incident was high and a group of villagers wanted to poison the carcass in order to eradicate the leopard. Meanwhile, the experts from ICS had a mission to the location to talk about the leopard with the people and distribute educational brochures among them. Also, local wardens and DoE tried their best to handle the villagers and even compensate their livestock loss, but it is not clear what has happened to the leopard and her cub.



livestock around a small village called Sogah on several times, concerns were brought up again. The occasions continued to

LEOPARD **LOSS** COUNTER (MAY & JUNE 2010)



Three dead individuals were reported during May and June. An adult male in Firouzkuh, Tehran was killed in a road-accident, following by a same event in Pol Dokhtar, Lorestan which is not fully confirmed. Besides, a male leopard in Torbat-e Jam, Khorasan Razavi hunted by a local herder with army rifle.



GOLESTAN NATIONAL PARK

The Golestan NP is the first Iranian national park which is extended among Golestan, Semnan and North Khorasan provinces. The park has been a protected area since 1957 with an area of 91890 ha. The region is in interface of two different mountainous systems namely, Alborz in the south and Kopet Dag-Khorasan in the north.

Golestan NP is a transitional zone between the Caspian forests, the Northeast Iranian dry steppe and the Juniperus woodlands. The most important river of the park is Madarsoo, which divided the park into the northern and southern parts and at the end flows to the Caspian Sea.

Meanwhile, Golestan has the farthest east points of Hyrcanian flora and brought it under severe influence of Irano-Turanian flora while increasing



its species richness. Fauna of the park mainly has a Palearctic origin and are belonged to Eurasian fauna zone. There is a rich diversity of mammalian carnivores including the Persian leopard, brown bear, grey wolf, striped hyena, Jungle cat, and wild cat. Meantime, ungulates of the park are the Persian ibex, Urial, goitered gazelle, Maral red deer, roe deer and wild boar. By the way, the last Caspian tigers were supposed to be eradicated in Golestan in 1959.

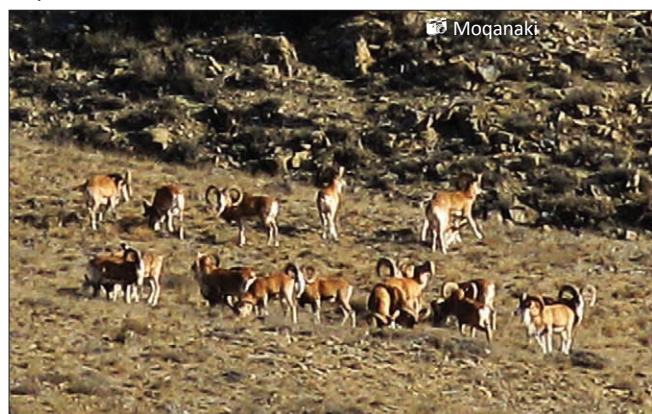
Because of the natural values of the park, like



verdant and virgin forest and different species of flora and fauna this park is one of the most famous reserves in the country. Unfortunately, in the Roads Ministry of Iran has taken some actions to rebuild the park roads and high flood-breaking concrete walls to control the annual floods. These walls has divided and fragmented the park and destroyed its integrity, organic and unique links.

Golestan is famous for its Persian leopards, as the largest specimen found in the country belonged to this area, based on a joint research by ICS, University of Tehran and Iranian DoE. The largest leopard skull ever recorded in the world belonged to the area, almost as the size of a female tiger.

Recently, an ICS research biologist is conducting her master thesis on food habits of Persian leopards in the Golestan NP. More than 100 scats have been collected to explore food items of the predator quantitatively. Preliminary results indicted high proportion of wild boars within the leopard's diet.



EFFORTS TO SAVE THE PERSIAN LEOPARD IN THE CAUCASUS

The leopard is a Critically Endangered flagship species of the Caucasus which once roamed within all six countries (i.e. Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey and Russia). According to the IUCN Redlist (2010), the overall population of the animal is no more than 50 for the whole region (except Iran), while recent status assessment of the species in Iran revealed a minimum of 40 animals for the Iranian Caucasus. At least 10 areas host the leopards in northwest Iran which almost two third of them are within the network of the Iranian reserves. Iran is the only country with a vital leopard population, which however needs to be protected much better.

In 2007, conservation experts and institutions from all six Caucasian countries joined to develop a Strategy for the Conservation of the Leopard in the Caucasus Ecoregion, based on a review of the status of the leopard population and its prey (Cat News Special Issue 2, 2007). In May 2010, three years later, the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, WWF and NACRES organised an informal meeting during the International Bear Conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, to discuss the status of the leopard, the implementation of the strategy and next steps with wildlife conservationists from the Caucasian countries. The following participants from the six countries presented a brief review of the situation of the leopard and leopard conservation activities: Armenia: Igor Khorozyan (WWF), Azerbaijan: Elshad Askerov (WWF), Turkey: Emre Can (Dogadernegi) and Can Bilgin (METU), Iran: Mohammad Farhadinia (ICS), Dagestan and Ossetia: Irakli Shavgulidze (NACRES) and Nugzar Zazanashvili (WWF) and Georgia: Irakli



Shavgulidze (NACRES). No representative from Russia attended the meeting.

The presentation of the range countries reports revealed that the base of information on the leopard in the Caucasus since the compilation of the status report (Cat News Special Issue No. 2, 2007) has not improved. Very little field activities have been carried out since, and the scarce data available do not indicate an improvement of the situation of the leopard at all. All participants agreed that the implementation of conservation measures is urgent, that however generating reliable intelligence on the situation of the leopard is the most urgent requirement.

Iran's representative presented a report to the head of the Iranian Department of the Environment (DoE) to elaborate Iran's essential role for ensuring the leopard in the Caucasian region and necessity of active involvement of the country in conservation efforts with neighbouring countries. Accordingly, Iran plans to join the initiative in coming meeting of the Caucasian Ecoregion Council and allocate more energy to the Iranian Caucasus to help the Persian leopard in the Caucasus.

SPECIAL THANKS TO ...

The Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) would like to thank the following people and organizations for their generous support to save the Persian leopards in Iran:

- Amersfoort Zoo, Netherlands
- Allwetter Munster Zoo, Germany
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- Talaee Publication Ltd., Iran

We still need your help to save the vanishing Persian leopards in Iran



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Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) is a non-governmental, non-profitable organization devoted to save the biodiversity which is so rich, but disappearing in Iran. Carnivores have essential priority within the ICS activities and various research and conservation projects have been implemented on the species, such as Asiatic cheetah, brown bear, striped hyeana, grey wolf, Eurasian lynx, caracal, mustelids and Persian leopard whose more than two third of its wild population occurs in Iran. It has been established in 2001 (registration number 13640) and hopes to celebrate its first decade of biodiversity conservation soon.



To learn more about Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS)
visit: www.wildlife.ir