

Trip to Iran – 25-30 November 2011

Since a few years we have been involved in the efforts to keep the Asiatic cheetah alive. In March 2010, we hosted a workshop to develop an Action Plan for the Asiatic cheetah in Iran on invitation and with the financial support of the Swiss Government. The meeting was organized in the Switzerland because the American colleagues from Panthera and the Wildlife Conservation Society, two organizations strongly involved in the CACP, did not receive visas for Iran at that time.

At this occasion, we also agreed with the Iranian delegation, led by the CACP Director and DoE Deputy of Natural Environment Division, Dr B. Sadough, to cooperate in a project named *Cats in Iran*. The purpose of the project is to review the conservation status of all cats in Iran according to IUCN standards, and to publish these assessments as special issue of *Cat News* in English and Farsi. Iranian teams have since compiled information on all cats in Iran, and from 27–29 November 2011, we now hold a workshop with delegates from all DoE provincial offices and with Iranian cat specialists from NGOs, from the DoE and from universities to review and complete the compiled information and to prepare the articles on the different species. The workshop was attended by some 60 participants from the entire country and was held at the Islamic University in Karaj, a western suburb of Teheran.

We however started our Iran visit on Saturday afternoon with a lecture at the Azad University in Teheran.



Part of the audience at Azad University on Saturday afternoon.

Iran is a country of cats. Ten species are part of the indigenous fauna, including the now extinct Caspian tiger and Persian lion. For the other eight species, namely the Asiatic cheetah, the Persian leopard, the lynx, the caracal, the jungle cat, the manul (Pallas's cat), the wildcat and the sand cat, Iran is an important stronghold. The only remnant population Asiatic cheetah today exists in central Iran, and for the leopard in the Caucasus, the only source population remains in north-western Iran. For other cat species, we have very little information from the entire Middle East, but it is obvious that Iran hosts the most important populations.

Iran has a well-developed network of protected areas, with the DoE a well-structured organisation present in all provinces, a good education system and a lot of enthusiastic young researchers and conservationists

organised in several NGOs. But the difficult political and economic situation impairs converting this enormous potential into good conservation. Nevertheless, all participants at the workshop were eager to contribute their knowledge and information. The first day was dedicated to education and information. We gave several lectures on cat conservation, assessment and monitoring, and the species coordinators presented the information so far compiled. Some presentations prompted many questions and lively discussions, which took a lot of time because all statements had to be translated between Farsi and English. On Day 2 and 3, we performed the species assessment according to our Cat Assessment Data Sheet (CADS) and the categorisation of all geo-referenced information into three classes: C1, certain and substantiated observations, C2, confirmed and properly recorded reports, and C3, unconfirmed or generic information. To do this, we split first into six regional working groups and subsequently into four species working groups, each compiling and reviewing the information gathered in the regional groups for two of the eight remnant cat species.



Workshop participants outside the University of Environment in Karaj.

People were enthusiastic and worked hard, although we had the CADS, the IUCN authority files and our instructions only available in English. The colleagues from the NGOs did a tremendous job with translation from English to Farsi and back! We nevertheless realised that we will need to produce a very short manual for the CADS and the assessment that can be translated into local languages and distributed to all participants.

For all species, the exercise brought new insights. Manul and sand cat, for instance, were found to be wider distributed than so far assumed, whereas for the wildcat, so far believed to exist “everywhere”, we now have a more differentiated picture. The leopard distribution area seems now to be split into two large populations, one in the Zagros Mountains and one in the Alborz Mountains. A great number of new geo-referenced and dated information were compiled and will provide very valuable input data for more sophisticated analyses. One important goal of such workshops is to overcome species by species and country by county the “believe-it-or-not assessments” based only on generic information.



Giving lectures with translators



Working groups in action

On Wednesday, 30 November, we had two meetings at the DoE. The first meeting, chaired by Hossein Mohammadi, Head of the Wildlife Office of DoE, was about the planned tiger reintroduction. Iran and Russia have an agreement to deliver Siberian tigers – to be reintroduced as Caspian tigers in Iran – against Persian leopards for the reintroduction project in the Sochi region. Two animals of each species were already exchanged. However, of the two Siberian tigers from zoos, one died in the holding centre in Iran. The DoE is building a breeding centre for tigers on the Miankaleh Peninsula in the Caspian Sea, from where tigers should be rehabilitated and released. The project is the result of a high-level agreement between the two countries. The DoE wanted to know our opinion and suggestions on this highly controversial project. We assumed that nowhere in Iran, there would be sufficient adequate tiger habitat to hold a vital population. Tigers – different from leopards or cheetahs – need habitats with dense vegetation and access to water, and the Caspian tiger was across the Middle East and Central Asia living in the riparian forests and extended reeds along the major water bodies. Since the Caspian tiger has disappeared in the 1950s, most of these habitats have been destroyed by massive water and land management projects, and the remaining patches are intensively used by humans. We emphasised that first of all, a thorough feasibility study must be carried out according to the IUCN Re-introduction Guidelines, including a population viability and habitat analysis. All participants in the meeting agreed, but as all were rather convinced that a PHVA would not be in favour of the reintroduction, possible alternatives were discussed. We suggested to build a large exhibition enclosure for tigers on Miankaleh Peninsula and to upgrade the tiger centre to a rehabilitation, education and training centre for all cats and for cat conservationists and the general public. Iran is in need of well-managed rehabilitation centres for confiscated wild cats, and the Miankaleh facility could become the first and most important one, where also staff could be trained.

The second meeting was with Dr Fazel and senior staff from the DoE and Karaj University. Dr Fazel is the director of this university, but he was recently appointed Director of Biodiversity of the DoE and has in this function replaced Dr. Sadough, also as CACP director. He has the intention to review all cat activities and to develop an integrated plan for cat conservation before continuing implementing e.g. the CACP Action Plan or to develop species-specific action plans (as agreed with the DoE for the leopard). Dr Fazel asked us to help with the planning for such a review and plan in a brief meeting on Sunday, and we drafted a briefing document that then was discussed in the meeting in DoE. IUCN has a standardised toolkit for the strategic planning in species conservation. This approach foresees also the development of multi-species conservation strategies and action plans in a participatory process. We suggested to the DoE to first develop a guiding Road Map for cat conservation and management with the participation of DoE biodiversity and wildlife experts and staff, scientists from universities interested in wildlife research, and representatives from national and international NGOs working in cat conservation in Iran. Such a Road Map should, for all Iranian cat species including the two extinct ones, define standards, priorities, and ways of collaboration between Iranian institutions and with international partners for monitoring, research, and conservation actions (including reintroduction projects). The conservation status reports to be drafted as a result of the Cats in Iran workshop will provide an excellent base for developing such a guiding document. DoE biodiversity group agreed with our suggestions and we were invited to submit a more detailed proposal until the end of the year. We agreed to facilitate a workshop to develop the Road Map in April 2012, so that the strategic document would be ready by end of spring next year, in order to not further delay the implementation of urgent conservation actions, e.g. for cheetah or leopard.

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