

YEMENI LEOPARD RECOVERY PROGRAMME

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The Arabian Leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) is arguably the rarest large cat on the planet. While this dubious distinction, based on a wild population of some 30 individuals, is generally given to the Amur Leopard (*P.p. orientalis*), there are close to 500 Amur Leopards held in zoos around the world. Wild Arabian Leopards might, by the most optimistic estimates, outnumber their far-Eastern cousins by as much as six to one, but with only 50 or so Arabian Leopards in captivity *P.p. nimr* is still at least twice as scarce as *orientalis*. That the Arabian subspecies survives at all is no small miracle on a peninsula where charismatic wildlife continues to disappear at an alarming rate. The Arabian Leopard's tenuous persistence in the wild is attributable to the resourcefulness of the animal, the ruggedness of the terrain that it inhabits, and pioneering conservation efforts across the peninsula, most notably in Oman and Sharjah, UAE.

The most recently inaugurated leopard conservation effort in Arabia is the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Programme (YLRP), an initiative that was started last autumn in an attempt to reverse the decline of Arabian Leopards in Yemen. The idea originated with former Sana'a International School (SIS) pupil Melissa Stanton as a means of continuing the ten-year SIS tradition of walking in the annual WWF "Walk for Wildlife." When WWF - UK decided to discontinue the Walk for Wildlife at the end of 2006, we decided to keep this popular school tradition alive as it is one of the most unifying events in the school calendar. The "1st Annual Walk to Save the Arabian Leopard," which was held on November 11, 2007, sprung from the premise that raising money for an endangered Yemeni animal and administering the funds ourselves would have greater relevance, especially for Yemeni students, than raising money for a non-indigenous species. Based on the amount of money raised (~\$6,000) and the total distance walked (> 2,400 km), both of which were school records, this premise was borne out. From this encouraging beginning evolved YLRP.

YLRP's goal is to ensure an expanding population of wild Arabian Leopards in Yemen. Employing a strategy based principally on recommendations of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, the YLRP seeks to achieve its goal by raising public awareness about the issue of leopard conservation in Yemen, improving the breeding success of captive leopards in the Sana'a Zoo, and enacting real protection for wild leopards. Ownership of the programme is kept with SIS students as a means of empowering them for future involvement in conservation issues around the globe. This is done through the Arabian Leopard Club, an organization with elementary and secondary branches. Older students generate leopard-centered activities that the younger children engage in. The younger students therefore act as a testing ground for activities that will eventually be expanded to other schools in Yemen and possibly elsewhere in Arabia. Members of the ALC also create



Fig 1 SIS students at the start of the 1st Annual Walk to Save the Arabian Leopard (©David Stanton).

fundraising items such as cards and posters, produce content for the YLRP website (under construction), and make presentations about conservation issues to Yemeni schoolchildren in other schools.

In just a few months the YLRP has achieved some notable accomplishments. We have brought the issue of leopard conservation to the attention of thousands of Yemenis through articles in local newspapers and magazines and in presentations to various audiences. We have initiated an institution-building process at Sana'a Zoo which should pave the way for improved facilities for their captive leopards and better utilization of the zoo's ability to educate a proportion of its 1.4 million annual visitors. Additionally, a children's book called "Vanishing Spots: the Arabian Leopard" has been written for the programme by children's author and folklorist Carolyn Han. A bilingual version (Arabic/English) with illustrations by Yemeni artist Abdullah al Amin is slated for free distribution to Yemeni schoolchildren. Most significantly, however, we have made considerable progress towards the designation of the Arabian Leopard as Yemen's national animal, an initiative that should eventually lead to a wide spectrum of improvements for Arabian Leopards in Yemen. In a parallel vein is the work that we have done towards the declaration of the "Wada'a Leopard Sanctuary," which when formalized will be perhaps the world's only protected area set aside specifically for the conservation of leopards.

These enigmatic animals are obviously a long way from having a secure future in Yemen, but given the trajectory and momentum of the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Programme, it is fair to say that progress is being made towards this end. Having generated a significant amount of interest in the cause, YLRP has become the focal organization for the conservation of Arabian Leopards in Yemen, and is now in a position to facilitate proper surveys and monitoring of wild leopards in this country. For more information or to make a contribution, please contact the coordinator, David B. Stanton, at P.O. Box 2002, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen, yos@y.net.ye, davidstanton@qsi.org, or Mobile No. 967733916928.



Fig 2 Wadi Lefaj in Wada'a, Amran where leopards are still believed to exist in Yemen (©David Stanton).