

LEOPARD TRAPS IN ARABIA

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Many of the Arabian leopards in the current captive population originate from Wada'a, in the western highlands of Yemen, where they were captured in traditional stone traps called margaba. These traps are also known from sites across the Arabian Peninsula including western Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the UAE, where one was discovered in Wadi Al Hilo, Sharjah, by staff of the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife during a field survey in January 2008. According to tourism websites, similar traps found in the mountains of Sinai are known as nosret al-nimr.

Margaba consist of an elongated chamber constructed of rocks and large stones, with an entrance at one end. Bait is placed at the other end, tied to a rope attached to a flat stone above the entrance. When a leopard pulls the bait, the stone falls and closes the trap. The external dimensions, based on three examples measured in Yemen and one in Sharjah, are – length: 275-300cm; width: 45-60cm at the entrance, widening to between 75-100cm; height: 55-60cm at the entrance rising to 120cm. Inside, the short entrance section is narrow and about 35-45cm square so as to keep the size of the 'door stone' to a minimum. The main internal space then widens out so that the trapped leopard can turn around, facilitating its transfer to a cage.

It seems that these traps have been used since ancient times to catch and kill leopards and other predators of domestic livestock. A smaller version in Sinai was reportedly designed to catch wolf and caracal and at least one striped hyena has been trapped in Wada'a. Wada'a is the only place where any detailed information is available and the only one where villagers specialised in live-trapping leopards for display. In December 2007, two Wada'a leopard trappers said they had caught ten and four leopards respectively. Once captured, leopards were carried back to the village in a steel box and formerly transported to a small menagerie in Sana'a where they were put on display, or sold to zoos in Sana'a and Ta'izz,



Fig 1 Cage for holding captured leopards at Wada'a in Yemen (©Jane-Ashley Edmonds).



Fig 2 Stone entrance to leopard trap at Wada'a (©Jane-Ashley Edmonds).

while some probably ended up on the private market. Previous visitors to Wada'a report that some captured leopards may be killed and their fat used for medicinal purposes to cure rheumatism and skin disease.

The Government of Yemen has banned the live capture of leopards. Staff at Ta'izz Zoo reported in December 2007 that they received the last animal from Wada'a in 1999 and that they no longer bought wild-caught individuals, while the community in Wada'a have ceased trapping and expressed a strong desire to conserve the remaining leopards in the area.



Fig 3 Stone leopard trap viewed from above at Wada'a (©Jane-Ashley Edmonds).