

## WILDLIFE TRADE IN SOMALIA

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Somalia's fauna is rated among the most interesting in Africa, owing to its high species richness and level of endemism. The species richness reflects the high diversity of ecosystems and wildlife of habitats. About 142 vertebrates are endemic into the country, comprising 8 species of birds, 22 species of fresh water fish, 82 species of amphibians and reptiles and 30 mammals. The Somali fauna contains very highly adapted arid and semi-arid ecosystems of Northeastern Africa and is considered a high conservation priority. The initial objectives of the survey was to reassess the presence of Bulo-burte bush shrike (*Laniarius liberatus*) along the riverbank of Shabelle in Hiran region, and further the survey aimed to assess general impact of wildlife trade to the fauna in southern Somalia. However, the recent fighting between Mogadishu warlords and unions of Islamic courts made it impossible to achieve the first objective and therefore we had to execute the second objective. The refined objectives were to identify trade-affected species; routes of wildlife trade in Somalia and export destinations, as well as to assess the wildlife trade and its impact on threatened fauna in Somalia.

Somali wildlife has never been well protected, and important habitats harbouring Somalia's biodiversity have been overexploited since the arrival of pastoralists at the Horn of Africa. Most big game such as elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), giraffe (*Giraffe camelopardalis*) and browse rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) became already extinct in northern and central Somalia even before World War II. Hunting in Somalia required authorization by the Secretary of State for Forests and Game (law no. 65 of 13 October 1971). However, illegal hunting continued in many parts of the Somalia, sometimes causing cross-border problems with neighbouring countries. Most widely used traditional hunting weapons were a bow and arrow, but small antelopes such as duikers and dikdiks were also trapped with nets. The situation of hunting has completely changed over the last two decades of civil war, as automatic guns became available for everyone and everywhere in the country, thereby strongly increasing both the number of hunters and illegal wildlife traders. In addition, many hunters adopted new hunting and trapping techniques, and learned to care and handle live animals bound to be sold in foreign countries.

The survey of wildlife trade in southern Somalia in 2006 revealed a strongly increased illegal trade of various species at local markets and for export purposes. About 32 species of vertebrates were identified during the survey. The intensity of wildlife harvesting varies among species, depending on the local situation and market demands. Eleven of these species are listed in the IUCN Red Data Book in 2004 as critically endangered (1), endangered (1) or vulnerable (9) and many others were also listed in Appendixes of the CITES. The illegal trade appears to exert a great pressure on the fauna of the country, particularly on threatened species such as cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), lion (*Panthera leo somaliensis*), elephant, dibatag (*Ammodorcas clarkei*), hirola (*Damaliscus hunteri*), beira (*Dorcatragus megalotis*), Speke's gazelle (*Gazella spekei*), Pelzeln's gazelle (*Gazella dorcas pelzelni*), Haggard's oribi (*Ourebia ourebi haggardi*) and silver dikdiks (*Modaqua piacentinii*).

Birds, such as ostrich (*Struthio camelus molibdophanus*) and bustards are hunted to prepare traditional medicines and as well for export. The bustards are also exported to the Gulf region for falconry purposes. Somalia harbours 8 species of bustards, representing 61 % of the total species bustards recorded in Africa (13 species). Birds of prey are also traded in Somalia and exported into gulf regions. Number of mammals, such as striped- and spotted hyena (*Hyaena hyaena* and *Crocuta crocuta*), hippos (*Hippopotamus amphibious*) and crested porcupines (*Hystrix cristata*) are hunted for medicinal purposes and exorcistic rituals. Some cat species such as lion cubs, cheetah and leopard, are traded in Somalia and exported into the Gulf region. The country harbours about 22 species of antelopes. Many species are nowadays exported to the Gulf region and Southeast Asia. The traded species comprise lesser kudu (*Tragelaphus imberbis*), gerenuk (*Litocranius walleri*), Speke's gazelle, dibatag, beira and dikdiks (*Madoqua guentheri*, *M. kirki*, *M. saltiana* and *M. piacentinii*). The survey also revealed that there are large numbers of captive antelopes in Mogadishu and other parts of southern Somalia. Health conditions of these captive animals are usually poor because of the lack of proper feeding and adequate veterinary treatment. Furthermore, there are currently no rescue centres that would allow local authorities to confiscate captive wild animals and release them in their original habitats.

Several reptiles, such as hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricate*), green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), leopard tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis*) and Somali chameleons (*Chamaeleo spp.*) are collected mainly for medicinal purposes and considered as aphrodisiac and the turtle-derived medicines are specially used to treat lung diseases such as tuberculosis, asthma and cough. The leopard tortoise and chameleons are also being exported to the Gulf region and Southeast Asia.

An increasing demand of tortoise bones in China and Southeast Asia may apparently encourage the collection of leopard tortoises in Somalia.

During the rule of the dictator Siad Barre, the country had only three international airports, namely Mogadishu, Hargeisa, and Kismayo, and these exit posts for goods were controlled effectively by customs authorities. However, during the civil war a range of new small airstrips were established. These airports are operated by private people and entrepreneurs and lack any effective control of the import and export of goods. The majority of the Somali population covers its protein demand from livestock, and only few people depend on wildlife for their subsistence. Nevertheless, there is profound lack of national awareness of Somali's rich variety of flora and fauna, nor of its international importance. Therefore, the continued and uncontrolled wildlife trade along with the loss of important wildlife habitats threatens the survival of certain restricted species, some of which risk to drift into a bottle-neck situation such as silver dikdik, and the Speke's gazelle which are both landlocked.



Lesser kudu awaiting shipment. ©Osman Amir

International conservation organizations must do more to halt illegal wildlife trade, to establish without further delay a network of small reserves, to protect the most seriously threatened species, to support local NGOs working in the field of natural resource management and to promote more sustainable ways to generate income from wildlife. Somalia's outstanding biodiversity is a natural heritage in the first place, yet in a wider sense it is a common heritage of mankind. Thus, the loss of endemic fauna would impoverish not only Somalia but the world in general.

**Editors note:** a pdf of the full report by Dr. Osman on the Wildlife Trade in Somalia can be downloaded at [www.wmenews.com/](http://www.wmenews.com/)