

FOUNDATION FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE ARABIAN LEOPARD IN YEMEN

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In a process sponsored by the Environment and Protected Areas Authority of Sharjah, hosted by the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, and facilitated by the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, "Yemen was identified as a key range state for the conservation of Arabian leopards (*Panthera pardus nimr*)." In light of Yemen's importance to the survival in the wild of what is arguably the world's second most critically endangered big cat, it is surprising how little support this country receives to protect its leopard population. Against innumerable odds, Yemen has to fight a solitary battle for the survival of what is now its National Animal. At the forefront of this battle is the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen (*moassassat hemayat al nimr al araby fi al yemen*).

Originating as the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Programme (YLRP) in late 2007, the foundation was officially registered with Yemen's Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour on November 18, 2009, an essential step in achieving our mission of ensuring an expanding population of wild Arabian leopards in Yemen. The foundation is blessed with a highly dedicated and active Board of Trustees which includes Yemen's Minister for Water and the Environment, His Excellency Abdulrahman Fadhl Al-Eryani, Yemen's two most highly esteemed Zoologists, Dr. Abdul Karim Nasher and his wife Dr. Masaa Al-Jumaily, a respected professor from Sana'a University, Dr. Amal Al-Kebssi, and Yemen's pre-eminent artist, Mr. Adnan Jumman. Board meetings occur monthly, usually with 100% attendance in spite of its members' busy schedules.

Achieving the foundation's objective is a long-term proposition that necessitates innovative action in three spheres; 1) raising awareness, 2) enacting protection, and 3) improving captive breeding success. Progress within these spheres hinges upon the April 29, 2008 Yemen Council of Ministers' decree naming the Arabian leopard as Yemen's National Animal. The full potential of the Arabian leopard to serve as a powerful symbol that can galvanize the public to enthusiastically support its conservation has yet to be unleashed. This is a situation that we strive to rectify through a variety of awareness-raising projects including the long-overdue *Vanishing Spots* (see WME News Volume 3 Issue 1).

Protecting wild Arabian leopards necessitates first finding them, a key foundation objective that consumes much of the foundation's resources and energy. Historical and contemporary reports of leopard sightings are received weekly and entered into the foundation's database. These are sifted for plausibility and sites are prioritized for rapid assessments. The rapid assessments involve a site visit, interviewing stakeholders, and engaging in preliminary field research. Where evidence of continued leopard presence is compelling, long-term camera-trapping surveys, such as the one we are currently facilitating on Jebel Milhan in Mahwit governorate are initiated.

Improving the breeding success of Yemen's captive Arabian leopards is progressing thanks to the initiative of Mr. Mohamed Al-Shawafi in Taiz. Taiz Zoo currently houses 19 adult leopards and 5 cubs, the world's second largest captive population of these beautiful animals. Only two of the zoo's



Fig 2. Wadi Shaharah on Jebel Milhan may be inhabited by Arabian leopards (© David Stanton).



Fig 1. Front Row from left to right: Dr. Amal Al-Kebssi, Dr. Masaa Al-Jumaily, Dr. Abdul Karim Nasher, Middle Row: HE Abdulrahman Al-Eryani, Mr. David Stanton, Back: Mr. Adnan Jumman (© Photo by Ms. Shireen Beatty).

leopards are wild-caught, the rest having been propagated by Mr. Al-Shawafi's innovative approach to leopard husbandry. The situation at Sana'a Zoo, which has four wild-caught leopards, is not yet as promising; so far, the zoo has never successfully reared a captive-born cub. The foundation is preparing the ground to foster exchange between the two zoos and other institutions, and staged four zoo visits in December alone.

To give the skeptics their due, there are numerous 'threats' that make leopard conservation particularly challenging in Yemen. Perhaps foremost of these is the deteriorating security situation. Who can focus on conservation in the face of a secessionist movement in the South, a vicious war in the north, and the looming specter of an American military presence? In fact, despite these competing forces, there is a growing conservation constituency in Yemen. Being based on the 'inside' we understand the situation on the ground better than any outsider ever could, and can allocate our manpower and resources where they will achieve the most in the face of the constantly fluxing internal situation. As foreign governments continue to issue travel advisories for Yemen, our workers move with confidence when we receive convincing evidence of leopard presence from areas that we know are stable.

Preserving Yemen's leopards is one piece in a peninsula-wide puzzle. We are working locally to do our part in solving what is essentially a regional problem and we look forward to truly joining forces with allies in neighboring states. It is only by doing so that we can win the war to secure the future of Arabia's most charismatic mammal.

For more information about the foundation, to join the "Friends of the Arabian Leopard" newsgroup, or to make a contribution, please contact the Executive Director, David B. Stanton, at P.O. Box 7069, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen, yrlp@yemenileopard.org

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