

ANIMAL TRADE IN IRAQ

Anna Bachmann, Nature Iraq.

anna@natureiraq.org

The trade in mammals and other species in Iraq are poorly understood, but survey teams from Nature Iraq, an Iraqi conservation organization, have been building a picture of the extent of the traffic. Since 2005, Nature Iraq has conducted winter and summer field surveys to identify sites of key biological diversity. Field teams have spent most of their time working in remote sites in marshlands, deserts, steppes and mountains, but in addition have visited local zoos and animal markets and have spoken with local communities including farmers, hunters/falconers, traders as well as local and regional government officials. Issues with unsustainable and uncontrolled hunting and animal trade have been raised repeatedly and a lot of anecdotal information has been gathered. As Iraq slowly rejoins the international community after years of isolation, the government is now considering joining the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). To provide information to the Iraqi government on this issue, Nature Iraq recently released a preliminary report on Animal Trade and Hunting in Iraq (Ahmed, H; Ararat, K; Fadhel, O, Haba, M & Salim, M, 2010).

There are some piecemeal attempts to curtail hunting and animal trade, with slightly more control over these activities in the northern part of the country (those areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, which has benefitted from more stability in recent years). Still, even in these areas, hunting and animal trade simply occurs less openly than further to the south. Overall there is very little that has been done to address trans-border trafficking in species.

Hunting has always been an important source of income for most people in the rural and even the urban areas of Iraq, but this has caused wide-spread eradication of many wild species including several globally endangered animals and birds that once existed in the region. In the north of the country, where showing wild species in the local animal markets is now against the law, the animals are simply taken to the hunters' houses where the selling occurs. According to the Nature Iraq report, a local hunter in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, Northern Iraq stated that, *"the main buyers of live-caught species are wealthy people and officials who either want to boast about having such animals, putting them in their personal gardens, or they use them for special medical treatments."*

Another means by which animal trade is occurring is through small and medium-sized zoos throughout the country. The owner of a zoo in Kurdistan was interviewed for the Nature Iraq report and stated that most of the exotic animals in the zoos that are imported into the country may be illegally smuggled from places like Africa and Thailand into Syria, but from there paperwork and documents are created to import them into Iraq. Potential buyers in Iraq can simply submit a request for particular species and the zoos, since they are licensed to receive and maintain exotic and native wild species, provide them to their customers. Thus the zoos are in essence operating as a hidden market where trading in these wild species takes place. For example, during their visit to one zoo in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Nature Iraq team found a customer waiting to buy a six-month old female lion cub obtained through Syria for a price of approx. 80,000 USD.



Fig 1. Marbled Ducks for sale in the Suq (© AF Omar).



Fig 2. Lion cub in Erbil Zoo (© H Ahmed).

Unlike the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, there appear to be fewer controls on animal trade and several of the markets deal quite openly in the trade of wild species. The situation in southern Iraq, in the Mesopotamian Marshlands, is centered on hunting and trade in waterfowl species and many of these species are sold in the markets for local use. At one local market Mallards were being sold for around 20 USD, and other species for about 15 USD, actually considered quite high prices for these species.

Hunting of Houbara (MacQueen's) bustard, a vulnerable species according to the IUCN, occurs in the desert regions of southern and western Iraq by locals, but in recent years foreign hunters and falconers from Gulf countries have been entering Iraq and killing large numbers of these birds. In addition there is evidence of a strong smuggling trade in these birds to Gulf countries.

The Nature Iraq report provided a list of species that are routinely traded out of the country. Otter pelts, from animals caught in Iraqi rivers and wetlands are mostly exported to Turkey and they have been reportedly used in the drug trade (the pelt forms a water-resistant sac that protects the drugs during smuggling). Gazelles are hunted for local consumption, but are also exported as either live animals or pelts to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Persian Squirrels are hunted in large numbers in the mountains of Kurdistan, Northern Iraq and are often sold within Iraq, but are also exported to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and some to Jordan. Indian crested porcupines are trapped and used locally (for folk medicinal uses), but also exported to Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Saker, peregrine and barbery falcons are all traded with Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. White-eared bulbul are transported to Syria and Jordan. Snakes like the horned sand viper are likely exported to Kuwait in the south and Turkey to the North.

Nature Iraq's initial report is preliminary and they hope to produce a more comprehensive version in the fall of 2010 but it is clear from these early findings that more attention and work is needed to fully characterize and eventually control hunting and the trade of species both into and out of Iraq.

A fully referenced version is available on the WME News website.