

Marker, L. (2005). Iranian cheetah conservation. *Animal Keeper's Forum* 7/8: 374-377.

Keywords: *Acinonyx jubatus*/cheetah/conservation

Abstract: The last half-century has seen the rapid decline of the world's last Asiatic cheetah. They are now extinct throughout the majority of their historic range, including Russia, India and the Middle East. The last stronghold of Asiatic cheetah is found on the edge of Dasht-e Kavir, a large area of desert and shrub steppe. This final population of critically endangered Asiatic cheetah occurs only in fragmented territories on the outer-ring of the Kavir Desert. Current estimates place the cheetah population in Iran at 50 to 60 individuals, a statistic boldly reaffirming the need for immediate cooperation and planning. The main threats to its survival are illegal killing and poaching, and habitat disturbance and degradation. Much of the cheetahs' former habitat has been converted to agriculture and other uses. In addition, lands have been fenced making it difficult for wildlife to move and the remaining range lands have been overgrazed that have led to desertification. There is direct competition between wild and domestic livestock and antelope. Camels and other livestock often dominate and pollute water holes making them inaccessible to wildlife. The paper describes the conservation activities of the different organisations involved over the past few years.

Iranian Cheetah Conservation

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The last half-century has seen the rapid decline of the world's last Asiatic cheetah. They are now extinct throughout the majority of their historic range, including Russia, India and the Middle East. The last stronghold of Asiatic cheetah is found on the edge of Dasht-e Kavir, a large area of desert and shrub steppe. This final population of critically endangered Asiatic cheetah occurs only in fragmented territories on the outer-ring of the Kavir Desert. Current estimates place the cheetah population in Iran at 50 to 60 individuals, a statistic boldly reaffirming the need for immediate cooperation and planning. The main threats to its survival are illegal killing and poaching, and habitat disturbance and degradation. Much of the cheetahs' former habitat has been converted to agriculture and other uses. In addition, lands have been fenced making it difficult for wildlife to move and the remaining range lands have been overgrazed that have led to desertification. There is direct competition between wild and domestic livestock and antelope. Camels and other livestock often dominate and pollute water holes making them inaccessible to wildlife.

My first trip to Iran was in October 2001, where Cynthia Olson, one of the Cheetah Conservation Fund's (CCF) International Scientific Advisory Board members and I worked with the Department of the Environment, Office of the President, Islamic Republic of Iran (DOE), to help initiate an international project to assist the country in saving the last of their cheetah. The project, "Conservation of the Asiatic Cheetah, Its Natural Habitat and Associated Biota in the I.R. Iran" (CACP) has been running since September 2001 in collaboration with DOE, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the International Union for Conservation (IUCN), the Centre for Sustainable Development (CENESTA), and CCF. The project is being funded by a grant from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Global Environmental Funds (GEF).

Iran considers the cheetah an important part of its natural and cultural heritage and as such it has become a symbol of its conservation efforts, not only for cheetah, but of the environment as a

whole. The CACP-GEF has as its goal the recovery of Asiatic cheetah and its prey. The mechanisms for reaching this goal include establishing a baseline of population data for all target species, research into ecology of and associated biota, environmental education to improve the popular perception of cheetah, enhanced law enforcement to protect cheetah and their prey, especially in PA's, and development of a co-management system for cheetah habitat involving local stakeholders. WCS is involved in assisting the development of the baseline population data and advising on other aspects of the project.

In September 2002 George Schaller and Tim O'Brien (WCS) conducted preliminary surveys of cheetah and prey in the Kavir National Park, the Khar-Touran Biosphere Reserve in Khorasan and Semnan Provinces, and the Dar Anjir Hunting Prohibited Area in Yazd Province. In May 2002, Gus Mills visited Naibandan Wildlife Refuge, and Tim O'Brien returned to Kavir NP and Khar-Touran BR. In addition, Eric Sanderson (WCS) worked with the DOE/GIS/RS lab to develop a cheetah database and a GIS database for the five proposed study sites; Kavir, Khar-Touran, Naibandan, DarAnjir, and Bafq. Tim O'Brien visited Tehran in October 2003 to assist in the analysis of survey data, design the Naibandan survey and help organize the many databases that DOE is developing.

In August, 2001, an Iranian, non-profit NGO was established called the **Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS)**. The society was founded by three young enthusiast natural resource students and is working to save the last remains of the Iranian cheetah. The ICS had been studying cheetahs for five years before official establishment and has made remarkable progress in activities over the past few years. The ICS is based in Tehran and has 300 members from all over the country. Its main goals are:

- Public awareness on the cheetah and its associated biota through education mainly at the local communities
- Reducing human-cheetah conflict via implementing socio-economic plans
- Biological surveys to know more about the Iranian cheetah
- Conserving the cheetah inside its natural habitats, particularly with the aims public participation.

In January 2004, I had the opportunity to travel to Iran for the second time to assist with cheetah conservation strategies in the country. Along with 12 other international specialists, including those listed above, and several others who are members of CCF's International Science Advisory Board, I participated in a three-day international workshop on the conservation of the Asiatic cheetah. The workshop was hosted by CENESTA and included partners in the conservation of Asiatic cheetah including the local communities in the peri-Kavir region. The workshop, attended by Iranian government officials, conservationists from around the world, Iranian camel herders, and small-stock farmers, sought solutions to the problems they face with the last few remaining cheetahs (less than 50) left in Iran. The workshop served as an opportunity to examine past efforts, assess the status of the species and plan long-term conservation strategies with stakeholders across the Iranian cheetahs' range.

The merging of national and international experts with local communities laid the foundation for a week of productive dialogue regarding the future of the cheetah in Iran. Government officials, scientists, and conservationists were engaged with nomads, camel herders, hunters, and the Organization for Nomadic Peoples of Iran to understand issues facing not only cheetahs, but also people. Creative thinking allowed all stakeholders to make meaningful connections between saving the cheetah and the betterment of livelihoods in the cheetah's range. Much was discussed regarding the integration of local communities with mutually beneficial conservation initiatives. The prospects of bringing international emphasis to Iran through means such as research, training, and ecotourism were also explored. It was encouraging to see people participating at multiple levels, and in spite of language differences, the translation was clear: no one can single-handedly save the Iranian cheetah without the interconnected cooperation of all faces seated around the table.

A broad spectrum of “people issues” surfaced during the length of the workshop, but fundamentally all parties agreed the Iranian cheetah is in crisis and its conservation is an urgent matter that will require a variety of essential elements. Continued planning and information sharing must occur with an understanding that there must be patience regarding expectations from all sides. Realistically, all problems are not going to be solved and any management program will take time. Saving the last Asian cheetahs is not an impossible task, but it will require mutual cooperation and respect.

Iranian cheetahs live in a harsh terrain with a very small prey base of antelope, hare, and wild sheep. The nomads and camel herders felt that conservationists must address the poaching and illegal hunting that is wiping out an already limited population of prey species. Additionally, overgrazing by livestock in the reserves has eliminated much of the vegetation the cheetah’s prey rely on. Therefore, adaptive livestock and wildlife management also play an essential role in conserving cheetah. Livestock undoubtedly needs to be removed from the core areas where the cheetah and its prey are struggling to survive. Simultaneously, methods of compensating people need to be identified and put in place. Without sustainable management for livestock and wildlife, the cheetah may not have a fighting chance.

The data gathered thus far played a crucial role in the discussions and planning that took place at the recent workshop. More information is needed, however, and the collection of data is a slow process. Fortunately, enough information was available to spark interest across diverse communities, and people are on the right track. Now more than ever, we know what information is needed to assist conservation efforts. The most difficult obstacles include finding the financial and human resources to obtain such information.

How many cheetahs remain in Iran? How widespread is the population? Where can cheetahs be found? Rare sightings have resulted in limited information, but future radio tracking initiatives could provide more definitive data. The WCS will likely conduct these vital studies, but proper protocols must be in place to ensure that accurate samples are obtained. In-depth range studies will provide CCF and its partners with the insights needed to take conservation planning to the next level.

Although this was only CCF’s second trip to Iran, much has been learned since the last visit. The International Workshop on the Conservation of the Asiatic Cheetah was a fundamental step in the long road ahead for this isolated population.

International recommendations include the following:

- The Iranian cheetah is facing a crisis; but we must have patience with each other;
- There needs to be continued planning, with expectations; management takes time and strategies are necessary;
- We won’t solve all the problems;
- The situation is urgent, we need to keep research going and must monitor actions;
- Critical actions need to be taken including understanding the impacts of hunting and gather data on hunting;
- Information must be shared so we all can better co-manage. No weapon or tool is held back;
- Important to map prey and rangelands;
- It is key to clear core areas for wild ungulates and cheetahs of livestock and humans, and understand where the core areas are;
- There is a need to understand the potential role in disease of wildlife and livestock and domestic dogs and cats; and understand the potential threats of disease;

- Adaptive management needs to be developed in areas around protected areas and the stakeholders must be monitored in the process;
- The needs of the people who are losing livestock must be acknowledged and schemes need to be developed which may include compensation;
- There is a lot of regionally and international knowledge available;
- There is a need for good cooperation and respect which will be the cornerstone of success.



Cheetah from Naibandand Wildlife Refuge
(photo courtesy of CCF)

Cheetah Fast Facts

- The cheetah originated over 4 million years ago in the region now occupied by Texas, Nevada and Wyoming. The last Ice Age, approximately 10,000 years ago, wiped out all the cheetahs in North America, Europe and a large majority in Asia and Africa. The cheetah is so different from other cats, it has its own genus, *Acinonyx*, and is the only living member of this genus.