

Population status of the Persian Leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor* Pocock, 1927) in Iran

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Abstract. The range of the Leopard is still known to include large areas of Iran. Data have been gathered mainly at nine sites since 1976. The results show that there are about 550–850 specimens in Iran, some 55% of which live in protected areas.

Kurzfassung. Die Verbreitung des Leoparden schliesst weite Teile des Iran ein. Aktuelle Daten seit 1976 wurden vor allem in neun Gebieten gesammelt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass im Iran noch etwa 550–850 Leoparden leben, 55% davon in Schutzgebieten.

Key words. Large cats, distribution, zoogeography, threatened animals, Persia, Middle East.

Introduction

The Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is well known and widely distributed in Iran. There are several places in Iran with the Persian (Farsi) name of Palang-Kuh, which means leopard mountain (Palang = leopard and Kuh = mountain).

Iranian Leopards are very variable in size and colouration: both heavy and pale specimens as well as light and dark specimens are found in different localities. NOWELL & JACKSON (1996) recognize three subspecies occurring on Iranian territory: *P. p. saxicolor* Pocock 1927, *P. p. dathei* Zukowsky 1964, and *P. p. ciscaucasica* Satunin 1964. However, according to MITHTHAPALA (1992), *P. p. dathei* is not a valid name, and *ciscaucasica* seems to be a synonym of *saxicolor*. It therefore seems that both the smaller and darker Leopards of the south and the larger and paler Leopards of the north are all better referred to as *saxicolor*.

The aim of this study was to collect information on the status of the Leopard in Iran, to make a rough assessment of the population size, and to identify the reasons for the decline of the species in this country.

Methods

Starting in 1976, one of us (B. H. KIABI) organized a survey among game wardens and hunters to obtain information on Leopard distribution and abundance. The interviews were conducted mainly by ourselves and also by some of our undergraduate and graduate students all over the country. The results of the interviews may be regarded as “guestimates”, combining substantiated estimates with guesses of the population size, often taking the size of potential habitats into