

CONSERVATION OF THE ARABIAN LEOPARD – WORKSHOP REPORT

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The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has placed the Arabian leopard in the category of critically endangered since 1996. One of the criteria for this classification is that less than 250 animals remain in the wild, an estimate that is widely recognised by experts from the region. Annual conservation workshops held at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW) in Sharjah since 2000 have repeatedly focused on assessing the plight of the leopard in Arabia. Recommendations from the 2003 workshop culminated in the publication of a range-wide status report in 2006 which combines regional knowledge into a single document and provides the baseline information from which to take the first steps in conservation planning.

The reports indicate that the range of the Arabian leopard is extremely fragmented with only a few remaining population nuclei along the mountains in the south and west. Of the three confirmed nuclei, even the largest population in south west Oman cannot be considered viable in the long term (*Breitenmoser et. al. 2006*). As the IUCN Red List classification states, the situation of the Arabian leopard is critical and urgent conservation action is required. However, initiation of conservation efforts to preserve the Arabian leopard requires considered and careful planning to be successful. The annual workshops have until now provided an avenue for international and regional experts to jointly assess what is known, what knowledge is lacking and what steps are required to enable successful conservation of the Arabian leopard.

The next step in planning for the conservation of the Arabian leopard is the step that allows attainment of our conservation goal by recommending “on-the-ground conservation strategies” (*Breitenmoser et. al. 2006*) that are endorsed by national authorities. This step was achieved during an intensive three day workshop held at the BCEAW, Sharjah from the 27th to the 29th of January 2007. The goal of the workshop was to develop a comprehensive Conservation Strategy for the Arabian leopard, its prey and habitats, in a participative process involving experts, wildlife conservation agencies, and representatives of special interest groups (*Breitenmoser et. al. 2006*). The aim of the Conservation Strategy is to define common goals and objectives, identify priority conservation activities on the range level, and provide guidance for the development and implementation of National Action Plans.

The workshop was hosted by the Environment and Protected Areas Authority of Sharjah and facilitated under the banner of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group by Dr. Urs Breitenmoser, Dr. Christine Breitenmoser-Würsten and Dr. David Mallon. In achieving the objectives of the workshop, the facilitators led the participants through the concept of a logistic framework pyramid. The LogFrame approach is a widely used methodology that defines common visions and goals, analyses problems and develops solutions (objectives, targets and activities) as a group.

- The long-term vision (top of the pyramid) for the conservation of the Arabian leopard is “to have viable and sustainably managed populations of the Arabian leopard, its wild prey and natural habitats in co-existence with local communities across its range in the Arabian Peninsula”.
- To achieve the vision, the mid-term goal (10 years) has been defined as “ensuring the survival of all known wild populations of Arabian leopard and developing conservation programmes for the leopard, its prey and natural habitat in all range states”.
- To achieve the goal, eleven objectives were identified each with 1-4 targets and 1-5 activities for each target, selected to direct the achievement of each objective. Targets and activities should be achieved within 1-5 years of the endorsement and implementation of the Conservation Strategy Plan for the Arabian leopard.

The objectives identified during the workshop included further assessment of known and existing Arabian leopard populations through monitoring and surveys; establishing an effectively managed network of protected areas (focusing on known and potential leopard sites and corridors); eliciting support from local communities and stakeholders; adoption and effective enforcement of adequate protective legislation for the leopard; its habitats and prey species; mitigating the main factors causing leopard decline; re-enforcement and re-establishment of non-viable populations; securing effective cooperation and partnership among the range states; providing a genetic and demographic buffer for the survival of the Arabian leopard through conservation breeding; combining *in situ* and *ex situ* projects into an inclusive conservation programme; and raising conservation awareness at all levels.

Strong partnership and common long-term goals are required for effective international cooperation (*Breitenmoser et. al. 2006*). The partnership must 1) include support for the implementation of the Conservation Strategy from national government (political and legal), 2) include stakeholder involvement of non-government organisations and 3) include scientific experts and technicians. With endorsement from political bodies of the range countries, the Conservation Strategy for the Arabian leopard acts as a guideline

for "on-the-ground" conservation action (Breitenmoser et. al. 2006) and expresses a common interest in saving the Arabian leopard. It is of utmost importance that the Conservation Strategy is endorsed by the political authorities in charge of nature conservation in each range country so that National Action Plans are designed and then implemented for each range country. Action Plans are not only the third and final step in conservation planning, they are also the action phase where a difference can be made and a unique species saved from extinction.

References:

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