

OMAN TRAINS YEMENI CONSERVATIONISTS IN LEOPARD RESEARCH

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In a region that faces numerous conservation challenges, there is perhaps no issue quite as pressing or problematic as the preservation of the Arabian leopard. As a result of relentless persecution and several other factors, the most powerful predator in the peninsula has become one of the rarest mammals on Earth. Some experts estimate the population to number fewer than 100. Of these, approximately 50 range the Jebel Samhan Nature Reserve and Jebels Qara and Qammar in Dhofar, Oman. The other key state for the survival of Arabian leopards in the wild is presumed to be Yemen where an unknown number are believed to exist at several sites. While the conservation of Arabian leopards in the Sultanate of Oman is effectively coordinated by the Diwan of the Royal Court, in Yemen leopard conservation is spearheaded by an NGO, the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen (FPALY). In an historic event that laid the foundation for future cooperation between the two nations, the Diwan's Office of the Conservation of the Environment recently hosted a team of seven FPALY trainees for a week of leopard field research training.

Engineer Salah Said Al-Mahthori, a Senior Wildlife Biologist with the Arabian Oryx Project and Senior Wildlife Ranger Mr. Khalifa Mohammed Al-Harsausi supervised the training. The program, which was designed by Hadi and Khaled Al-Hikmani of the Arabian Leopard Survey, consisted of two days each on Jebels Samhan, Qara, and Qammar. Khaled Al-Hikmani led the training. The five Yemeni trainees included Dr. Mohamed Al-Doais, Ibrahim Wada'i, Nasser Aswot, Yousuf Mohageb, and Awad Al-Akbary. Also participating were Swiss graduate student Malini Pittet and FPALY Executive Director David Stanton.

The original concept behind the training was to partially address the capacity gap that exists in Yemen. As one of two nations with a potentially viable wild leopard population, Yemen is challenged by its lack of qualified field researchers. Until now, leopard research in Yemen has been sporadic and opportunistic and executed by volunteers with little field experience. As a result of the training, Yemen now has a cohort of five Yemenis who have first-hand experience in tracking leopards, in identifying and assessing leopard sign such as scats and scrapes, and who have trekked extensively through prime leopard habitat. The group received further training in the placement and monitoring of trail cameras for optimal results.

Initial support for the mission in the form of a \$3,000 grant to cover travel expenses and other costs was awarded by the Abu Dhabi Chapter of the Emirates Natural History Group. The Griffin Group provided a grant of \$2,240 to cover additional expenses and a project vehicle was provided by the National Tobacco and Matches Company. Finally, the mission was generously hosted within Oman by the Diwan of the Royal Court of the Sultanate under the direction of His Excellency Dr. Sheikh Talib Hilal Al-Hosni, Secretary General of the Diwan.

Hadi and Khaled designed an exceptional programme. Spending the first two nights on Jebel Samhan, the team hiked to a remote ledge where it saw leopard scrapes, scats, and tracks. Further along the ledge Khaled had installed a trail camera, which in addition to pictures of Nubian Ibex and Rock Hyrax, had recorded two images of an Arabian leopard.



Fig. 1: Group Portrait. Standing L to R: Tom Evans, Awadh Al-Akbary, Yousuf Mohageb, Darko Mocilnikar, Kevin Rushby, David Stanton, Ibrahim Wada'i, Salah Al-Mahthori, Khaled Al-Hikmani Kneeling L to R: Nasser Aswot, Khalifa Al-Harsausi, Mohamed Al-Doais, Fadhli Al-Eryani, Malini Pittet



Fig. 2: The team negotiates a ledge on the south face of Jebel Samhan

The next two nights were spent on Jebel Salalah (aka Jebel Qara) where Khaled assured the team that it would find much more recent sign. Hiking down the near vertical wadi slope, the trainees accessed a ledge covered in a thick layer of gray dust where it found tracks so fresh that the texture of the leather on the pugmarks could clearly be seen. Here, Khaled's cameras had recorded Porcupine, Blanford's Fox, and a healthy male leopard.

The team spent its final night on Jebel Qammar near the Yemen border where it found more signs, and another trail camera which had recorded yet more pictures of leopards. The difference between this site and the previous two visited was that on Jebel Qammar the camera was placed an easy five minute walk from the plateau, not far from human habitations. It seems Arabian leopards, like their African and Indian cousins, can live in close proximity to humans.

Saying 'goodbye' to its Omani hosts was not easy for the team; strong bonds can develop during a week in the field. More important than these bonds, however, is the link that has now been established between the key stakeholders for the conservation of Arabian Leopards in Oman and Yemen. Plans for a reciprocal visit in the spring are already being made and the possibility of future annual trainings was enthusiastically discussed. Since 1997, Oman's Arabian Leopard Survey has been at the forefront of the in situ conservation of Arabian leopards. For almost a year, FPALY has persevered in its struggle to create a credible leopard conservation programme in Yemen. It will be years, if ever, before the Yemeni effort catches up with that in Oman. However, a precedent has been set and a seed for future cooperation planted. We need now only water it and see what grows. For more information about FPALY, to join the "Friends of the Arabian Leopard" newsgroup, or to make a contribution, please contact the Executive Director, David Stanton, at P.O. Box 7069, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen, david@yemenileopard.org Mobile No. 967733916928.

Fig. 4: Khaled Al-Hikmani shows us an Arabian leopard recorded by one of his trail cameras on Jebel Qara



Fig. 3: A very fresh leopard track on Jebel Qara, probably less than 24 hours old