

THE STATUS OF FEUDS IN THE WILD

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The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Red Data Book gives the following information about the status of felids:

Endangered species : tiger, snow leopard and Iriomote cat.

Endangered subspecies : Florida and Costa Rican puma, Spanish lynx. Pakistan sand cat, Asiatic lion, South Arabian, Barbary, Anatolian, Sinai and Amur leopards and Asiatic cheetah.

Vulnerable *species* : ocelot, wild cat, tiger cat, margay, jaguar, leopard, clouded leopard and cheetah.

Rare *species* : bay cat and Andean cat.

Rare subspecies : Turkmenian caracal.

Such classifications give only a broad and vague picture of the status of the cats, and give no indication of how populations are being fragmented and wiped out. In fact, there is no place where cat populations can be said to be safe, and there is a general decline.

The status of the cats depends on two principal factors - the condition of their habitat and the extent of human predation. Unfortunately, the situation is unsatisfactory in both cases.

There are a few places in the world where cat habitat is not decreasing because of human activities. Throughout the tropical and subtropical regions deforestation is a continuous problem, while grasslands and wetlands are being converted to human use almost everywhere-Meanwhile, the cats continue to be hunted. Until recently, world fashion markets in North America, Europe and Japan were the force behind the massive slaughter of spotted cats. Fortunately, the growing strength of the Convention on International Trade in Wild Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) and campaigns against the use of wild furs have checked this onslaught. CITES prohibits international commerce in Andean cat, marbled cat, ocelot, black-footed cat, flat-headed cat, Asiatic golden cat, Asiatic lion, jaguar, leopard, tiger, snow leopard, clouded leopard and cheetah. All other cats are on Appendix II, which provides for monitoring trade through licensing. Some illegal trade continues by using forged licences, especially of South American catskins shipped to the free port of Hamburg in West Germany from Paraguay. There is also a considerable legal trade in leopard cat skins from China to Japan.

Trophy hunting, which is mainly for the big cats, has also declined because of CITES controls, as well as national bans. But here the sticky question has arisen whether some individual animals should be sacrificed in the interests of the species as a whole - CITES nations have agreed to leopard quotas from some African countries, and Zimbabwe would like to introduce the same system for cheetah on the grounds that, unless they can be the source of some income, farmers losing livestock defy bans on killing these protected species. There are many people who dislike the idea, but would reluctantly agree to licenced hunting if the proceeds promote conservation. It is accepted that Zimbabwe has a strong wildlife administration and knowledge of animal populations, and that the proceeds there go to the farmers in-

volved. However, there are fears that elsewhere hunting programs could lead to corruption and abuse, so that quotas are exceeded and other wildlife indiscriminately shot, while funds generated would not reach conservation authorities or local people who had been persuaded to tolerate predators.

Local hunting is still widespread, and there are reports of large numbers of skins on sale in China. Some of the varied peoples of the mountainous regions from Northeast India into Southeast Asia hunt cats for skins and also for meat.

With the diminution of habitat cats and their prey species become more vulnerable. If prey species are hunted out, cat populations inevitably decline and surviving cats turn to domestic livestock and then get killed as pests.

There have been few attempts to survey the status and distribution of the lesser cats, but I must mention the studies in India by Dr. Biswamoy Biswas and colleagues in North Bengal and Sikkim, and of Mr. V.D. Sharma in his home state of Rajasthan. Such studies present enormous difficulties because of the secretive life these cats lead. Evidence of their existence is frequently hard to come by, and it is often a problem to distinguish species from sign in areas where more than one exist.

It is unlikely that special reserves can be established for lesser cats: Fortunately, they are usually found in habitats with larger species which get more attention. National parks and reserves provide habitat, and the ecological approach of Project Tiger in India has certainly benefitted the lesser cats, apart from all other species in the tiger areas. Reserves for elephant and rhino serve the same purpose. The work of the International Snow Leopard Trust and the promotion of reserves will help Asian mountain species such as lynx and Pallas's cat.

STATUS REVIEW

The following is a brief review of the status of cats, other than the big cats, in some Asian countries, based on reports from members of the Cat Specialist Group.

Bangladesh

The country's eight cat species have been isolated in small pockets of surviving forest, although jungle and fishing cats might be found in thickets. All species have legal protection, but they are declining because of poaching, poisoning, and habitat destruction. Clouded leopard is still found in the evergreen forests of Chittagong and the hill tracts, but furs are common in Chittagong market, many probably coming from Burma.

Bhutan

Excellent cat habitat remains, and there is little poaching by the dominant Buddhist population. However, poachers do enter southern regions from India. There have been no status surveys so far.

Burma

There is still extensive forest which provides cat habitat, but poaching for skins and meat is widespread, and there is no sound status information.

China

China has twelve cat species. Apart from the big cats, golden and Pallas's cats and lynx are on the protected list. Poaching is rife for furs, even of protected species, and they are openly sold in rural and town markets, and even in Beijing. Leopard cat of the Chinese subspecies are legally taken for massive export to Japan.

Tiger bones have always been a part of traditional Chinese medicine, and the demand causes continued hunting of the few survivors. But because of the shortage, bones of other cat species are used as substitutes, notably of leopard and golden cat. which is regarded by people as a kind of leopard.

Clouded leopard has a fairly wide range and is reportedly fairly common in Jiangxi and Annul provinces. Although protected, it is poached for pelts and bones.

The Chinese desert cat is not considered very rare in the wild, while Pallas's cat is said to be still comparatively numerous. Lynx furs are in great demand. Little is known of the jungle and wild cats.

India

India has fifteen cat species, having lost the cheetah by about 1950. Except for tiger and lion, knowledge of the status of cats is low. The clouded leopard is said to be in fairly good shape in Arunachal Pradesh, but rare and endangered elsewhere. Several species are still heavily hunted, including leopard cat which, nevertheless, seems to be holding its own. Lynx in northern Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh have been taken for the fur trade. Pallas's cat, found only in Ladakh, needs reserves protected from sheep grazing.

The large-scale destruction of forests, which affects the whole of northeastern India, and poaching for furs and meat, have been documented especially for North Bengal and Sikkim by Biswamoy Biswas and his colleagues during recent lesser cat surveys. The team recorded leopard cat throughout their survey area, and records were collected of some occurrences of marbled cat and golden cat. both of which appeared very rare.

Nepal

There is very little information about cats in Nepal, except for tiger. Leopards appear to be still fairly common and cause problems taking livestock. The Government has asked for the leopard's status to be changed from "endangered" to "threatened" in United States legislation in order to encourage trophy hunting. It is argued that income from high-paying hunters would provide an incentive for conserving leopards, but this would only be so if the local people suffering deprivations received the benefit.

Pakistan

Very little information is available on cat status. The sand cat is extremely rare and might be extinct. Lynx presumably survive in northern regions. But poaching of all wildlife has been heavy.

CONSERVATION

We need information on the distribution and status of cat species in order to recommend conservation measures. Reserves specifically for

lesser cats are unlikely to be established, but those for more prominent species such as tiger, snow leopard, elephant, and rhino are obviously helpful.

Research is underway on the clouded leopard. Alan Rabinowitz of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) is working in the Huay Kha Khaeng reserve in Thailand. He is notable for his work on the jaguar in Belize which has resulted in the first reserve anywhere specifically for that species. Wolfgang Peter, a German biologist, plans a study in peninsular Malaysia where the clouded leopard faces the dominant competition of tiger and leopard, and Sarawak, where it is the top predator.

It is hoped that the Wildlife Institute of India will promote surveys of lesser cats.