

Leopard Poaching in Sri Lanka

Andrew Kittle and Anjali Watson

Over the course of the last two and a half years, while conducting a field study on an arid zone leopard population in southeastern Sri Lanka, we have become increasingly concerned about the severity of the poaching that occurs in the island, and its impact on this endangered sub-species.

During these two years we have learned of twenty six (26) leopards poached in Sri Lanka – 10 from the area around the North of the Wasgamowa National Park, 5 around the Uda Walawe National Park, 5 around the Ruhuna National Park, 4 around the Wilpattu National Park, and 2 “up country” near Nuwara Eliya.

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Food Supply

Contrary to popular belief, the amazingly adaptable leopard is able to survive throughout the country providing there is for them an adequate prey base and some form of vegetative cover. Even when wild “game” are absent leopards can and do survive by switching their hunting efforts to tamer prey such as dogs and cattle (A fact also noted by wildlife officials in India).

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Skins of 3 adult leopards shot by a villager on the northwest border of Wasgamuwa National Park. Pix by W. Dittus.

There have been other reports from other areas in the country but they have not been investigated. The fact that the animals were almost exclusively from in and around National Parks does not mean that these areas are the most frequently exploited (although porous park boundaries are a nagging problem in Sri Lanka), but rather that this number is the mere tip of the iceberg as far as leopard poaching is concerned!

This is due to the fact that it is only in those areas where the Wildlife Department (DWLC) operates

that ‘busts’ are actually made.

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Unlike an elephant, whose carcass is difficult to miss, a poached leopard is relatively easily dispatched and hidden, and it is only through prior knowledge and investigative work on the part of the under-funded and understaffed Wildlife Department that any poached leopards are tracked down at all.

How many are actually killed each year is therefore unknown!

While a beleaguered Government Department and National Park buffer zones are **home to more people than wildlife**, both contribute to the depth of the poaching menace in Sri Lanka, it is invariably the underlying socio-economic problems that create the climate for poaching in the first place.

The eternal struggle between people and the wildlife with which they co-exist is never easy to settle but if the root causes are made clear, perhaps, some steps can be taken to steady the precarious balance, **to the benefit of both sides.**

Who and Why

To begin with, it seems sensible to ask two simple questions: Who poaches leopards and why?

In a sense, the answers are as straightforward as the questions. It is usually local farmers and villagers who are responsible for actually killing the leopards in this country (although the impetus

is usually from elsewhere) and they do it for money! That a leopard is worth more to these people dead than alive is indicative of the incredible amount of work that needs to be done in order to redress the balance and provide leopards with a less bleak future.

There is a saying in parts of Africa along the lines of **"Wildlife pays, so wildlife stays"** which effectively encapsulates the logic behind making living wildlife a productive sector of any country's economy.

How to go about making this slogan a reality is complicated and time-consuming but it has been proven from time to time by grassroots organizations the world over that it is indeed possible.

Monitored Hunting

An example is Operation CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe where carefully monitored trophy hunting in a community managed area has both reduced the level of wildlife poaching and generated much needed income for the community. Of course, trophy hunting is a contentious issue on its own but it's the broader issue of reliance on an entirely economic impetus for conservation that is disturbingly narrow.

Too often, however, reality dictates that this is necessary, at least in the short term, to address immediate concerns and avert imminent ecological losses.

In Sri Lanka it seems a case of empowering rural communities in a way that ensures that it is in their own best interests to conserve the wildlife with which they live. Again these are simple words that need to be translated into positive actions.

While individual solutions can be very effective, especially when tailored to specific circumstances, **a truly meaningful attempt to solve this long-standing issue requires a committed effort on the part of the Government.**

For, in reality, the people who poach wildlife do so because they have been systematically marginalised, both economically and socially.

Feeling left out of "the system", people are encouraged to find solutions to their myriad problems in ways, which are similarly outside of "the system". **If this means breaking laws and carving into the National Heritage then that is what will happen for laws become superfluous when survival is paramount.**

'Mudalalis'

The real culprits behind any poaching problem are the profit-mongers, who exploit particular circumstances in a destructive and often thoughtless effort to capitalize financially, and those who demand the products of poaching so they can adorn their walls, soothe their ills or increase their stature.

It is this latter group that is of most concern for wherever they exist the former will appear, **all too willing to do the dirty work as long as they also reap their reward.**

In the late 60s and early 70s it was the fashion industry that was the most accessible target for scorn and action, with leopard skin coats, bags and hats being preposterously turned into the height of *chic*.

Pressure applied by various lobby groups, in addition to growing sensibilities regarding human-wildlife relations, changed consumer opinion regarding the use of animal skins for clothing and accessories.

While there remains a flourishing niche market for such accoutrements (consisting of individuals too far removed from the natural world to even understand their own appetites) the fashion industry has ceased to be the major player in the poaching game.

So who has stepped into the void?

Without having undertaken too many intensive covert operations we are able only to give some opinions (developing ones at that) based on our experiences of working with leopards in Sri Lanka. There has never been a sustained effort in Sri Lanka to understand the degree of poaching pressure on wild populations either within National Parks or elsewhere.

In effect, most theories are based on anecdotal evidence gleaned from first hand experience or conversations with officers closely linked to wildlife protection in the country.

The Biodiversity Protection Unit of the Customs Department has revealed a patchwork history of detections of leopard products leaving the country. The biggest find in the past two decades was in 1982 when a caché of 11 skins was concealed in the false bottoms of wooden crates exporting gramophone cones.

Confiscated at the Export Office, some of these skins were so fresh that blood was still in evidence. Since that time only two individual skins have been intercepted, both prepared with considerable skill according to officials. The first was found in 1992 in the personal luggage of a British national who had been in Sri Lanka as part of the Victoria - Randenigala Development Scheme. The second was in a parcel post package, detected in 1996. **The British National apparently returned to Sri Lanka for the court hearing but was not prosecuted!**

The Indian Connection

While many of the precise details and statistics are unavailable for Sri Lanka, there is mounting evidence from India to indicate an extensive and established trade in leopard products in the region. According to Devinder Sharma (Environment News Service) a nationally publicized raid near New Delhi in India on January 28, 2000 **seized some 70 leopard skins and 18,000 leopard claws** in addition to a scattering of tiger products, indicating that there definitely is a colossal demand within the region.

As each leopard has 18 claws (5 on each hind paw and 4 on each front) this works out to an astounding minimum of 1000 animals! It is doubtful that Sri Lanka even has that number of leopards.

The skins and claws confiscated in India were on their way along a well-worn trail that leads from the forests of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and

Himachal Pradesh, through curing stations located in small towns, to larger centres like New Delhi where they are shipped abroad for final consumption.

Where they end up seems to depend a fair amount on the particular products and their purported uses.

Leopard Products / Uses

The following is a rough breakdown of leopard products, their typical uses and destinations:

- **Skins** - The unrivalled beauty of a leopard's skin, evolved in such a way as to keep the animal out of sight from predators, has historically - and ironically - been the greatest contributing factor to its global depletion. Indigenous groups from Africa, Asia and the Middle East have utilised the spotted skin of a leopard **as a designation of prestige**, often worn by high-ranking members of the community or during ceremonial events.



Confiscated skin and skull of an adult male leopard.
Pix by W. Dittus.

As mentioned this concept was taken to new, unsustainable levels in the late 1960s and 70s by the fashion industry before consumer demand encouraged the use of synthetic materials.

Today the leopard skin is still sought after for its remarkable beauty and the demand seems to

originate in the Middle East, where leopards no longer roam in anything other than highly threatened, isolated pockets. Increasingly, it seems skins are not worn but hung on walls and laid on the floor as rugs!

- **Bones** – Although not usually associated with leopard poaching, bones are now being used with increasing frequency as substitutes for the bones of the much rarer tiger. These have long been used as vital ingredients in a number of Eastern, particularly Chinese and Korean, homeopathic or traditional treatments for anything from rheumatism to hydrophobia. Hundreds of kilograms of leopard bones have been found in association with skins and claws, in a number of illegal product seizures in India recently. This is currently the biggest threat to wildcat populations in Asia with prices for a kilogram of bone being up to 10 times that of skins.

- **Claws** – As with leopard skins the demand for claws as a fashion accessory appears to have originated with tribal groups. Many in the Himalayan region of India use them as necklaces. These necklaces are seen as being able to repel evil spirits and provide luck and prosperity. A recent poaching incident in the Nuwara Eliya district of Sri Lanka involved the removal of claws from the body of the dead leopard, indicating the possibility of a local market. Whether there is a burgeoning market for these claws is unknown.

- **Teeth** – The canine teeth of leopards have long been used as charms and can now be seen incorporated into modern jewellery, apparently giving it that "masculine edge" desired by many.

Preparation

Something that initially puzzled us about some of the poached (confiscated) leopard skins that we were able to examine in Sri Lanka was their generally poor condition. The job of skinning the animal and then stretching and curing the skin was inexpertly done

in most cases that we saw. In fact, so shoddy was the final product that we had doubts about the ability of the owner to make a sale!

This led us to the realisation that the procurement of skins was probably not the original reason for killing the animal and the processing of those skins was done almost as an after-thought.

With so many leopard products in demand from so many different corners it is impossible to know the truth without being told by the poachers themselves. However, our pursuit of that truth led us to a very interesting piece of information that further expanded our conceptual grasp of the demand for leopard products.

Medicinal

Within Sri Lanka there is a long history of traditional medicine that recognizes the natural world as a dazzling storehouse of remedies, herbs and elixirs. The knowledge held by the esteemed practitioners of this form of healing is legendary and their understanding of plant physiology and botany is often phenomenal.



Confiscated skins of 2 young leopards poached on the western border area of Ruhuna (Yala) National Park, Block 1. Pix by A. M. Kittle

However, woven into the tapestry of proven treatments are various folkloric remedies that rely entirely upon the psychosomatic responses of the patient and have no actual cause and effect

relationship between illness and remedy. One of these is the notion that eating that portion of flesh that extends down the leopard's neck from behind the ear to the shoulder can control asthma. The idea is that a leopard cannot lick this part of its body.

Why unlicked flesh is preferable and how it has become targeted at asthma is unknown. It does not seem to be a definitive treatment as we have also encountered those that have been told that simply wearing a leopard's tooth or claw around the neck as a charm will keep the asthma at bay.

While we do know of those who swear that the frequent consumption of this flesh has kept them alive, the rate of poaching carried out to meet this sort of demand is unknown.

Human / Leopard Conflict

Of course, not all poaching is carried out with the intention of procuring products for sale. High human population densities in the sub-continent mean that habitat destruction and encroachment are proceeding at alarming rates.

This has put more and more people in direct conflict with wild animals in and around protected areas, not to mention forest tracts, without the benefit of protection.

India has long lived with this problem and while Sri Lanka does not yet find itself in a situation quite so acute, signs seem to indicate that that is the direction in which it is heading. Unlike the sloth bear and even the tiger, leopards are very reluctant to move out of their territories after they encounter encroachment, even if that option is available.

They seem to prefer to stay where they are and adapt to the changed circumstances. With the ability to survive in all manner of habitat and utilize everything from buffalo to field mice and even insects as prey, leopards are the most adaptable of the big cats.

As a result, increased human presence in leopard habitat leads to increased leopard / human



Toque macaque monkey injured in a snare set by poachers. Polonnaruwa sanctuary. Pix by W. Dittus.

conflict. While it is exceedingly rare for leopards to actually attack humans (like most wild animals, they would much rather avoid the presence of people) they do begin to prey on domestic livestock such as cows and goats as well as on the dogs that invariably accompany encroaching settlers.

Like elephants invading a *chena* farmer's crop, a leopard killing one of his cows is not something to be taken lightly by its owner and the result of this kind of predation is often the retaliatory killing of the leopard. As leopards do not easily abandon their kills, the easiest and least traceable method of killing them is to poison the carcass.

Of course, if the carcass were fresh then a well-placed bullet would be more productive as the flesh of the kill can still be utilized. With a dead leopard on his hands and a market for leopard products available it makes sense for the farmer to take what he can from the animal, especially if he is minus one cow. Needless to say once an individual has started down the slippery slope of poaching and discovered how profitable it can be, it becomes more and more difficult to put on the brakes.

Indirect Poaching

An alarming number of other animals are routinely poached in Sri Lanka. This has many indirect yet extremely serious effects on leopard populations countrywide. Many leopards are caught in traps

laid for other animals, a case in point being the recent death of a healthy young male leopard in the Nuwara Eliya region, caught in a wild boar trap.

Almost ripped in half by the tightened wire this animal died an excruciating death. Ironically, the leopard may have been hunting the very animal that had been deemed such a pest to the estate area as to warrant the setting up of the trap.

Even more disturbing is the obscene level of poaching that occurs in order to supply meat to religious pilgrims coming to Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines. Working in Yala, we could accurately determine how close in the calendar we were to a religious festival or Poya Day by the number of gunshots heard in and around the park.

The prime targets for these poachers are spotted deer, sambhur and wild boar, which for many have come to be associated with a visit to the Kataragama Devala or the Sithulpahuwa site. Individuals openly selling this illegal game operate right outside the gates of the Park and have a well-established network involving a number of the hotels and guesthouses used by the pilgrims.

It is not only the religious sites, however, that receive the bounty of the poaching party. Some of Colombo's elite is certainly not averse to sampling this meat, irrespective of its origin.



A collection of poachers tools, wild boar meat, deer hides and antlers confiscated at Polonnaruwa Sanctuary. Pix by W. Dittus.

On-going

How this poaching affects the leopard population is obvious. The more venison that is smuggled into the Rest Houses of Tissa and Kataragama or onto the dinner tables of Colombo, the fewer deer remain in the forest to support the leopards. With a high degree of poaching occurring on the peripheries of National Parks, often by the very same farmers that are encroaching on the boundaries, the livestock introduced to the area become more vulnerable to leopard predation. Thus the cycle continues.

Obstacles to Prosecution

Compounding the problem is the fact that the Wildlife Department, while for the most part active in their pursuit of poachers, is simply not adequately equipped to deal with the scale of the issue. Carrying out a raid involves a number of steps, each vital to the overall success of the operation. Initially the existence of poached products will come to light through a tip off or via circulating rumour.

Then there must be some form of reconnaissance in order to ascertain whether or not the products in question are indeed in evidence. Where the poached items are visible it is then possible to make a straight raid on the premises.

However, most of the time, they will be hidden away so a "buy" will have to be organized. This means that a meeting must be arranged between the involved parties. This is a particularly tricky stage of the operation for, as a rule, poachers are wary of anybody asking to purchase their wares. A fair amount of tact is required.

Vigilance and Tact

The meeting itself must be carried out to the point where the items in question are actually purchased by the 'agents' of the Wildlife Department, as simply verifying that they are in existence might be enough to undertake prosecution for possession but not for the more serious charge of selling.

Assuming these steps are successfully negotiated,

and the seller arrested, it is then up to the Wildlife Department Rangers in charge to present the case in open court. This is a massive stumbling block to proceedings as many Rangers admit that they are not trained for this type of legal work.

Add to this the fact that many sellers are "connected" in one way or the other and the end result is often acquittal. Even if the poacher or seller is found guilty the resultant fines are not sufficient to stall, let alone halt, those involved.

Instances

Two recent situations highlight this shortcoming in the battle against poaching. In mid-2001 Wildlife Department officials at Yala received information that leopard skins were being held on a property outside the National Park. During a reconnoiter the skins were seen on the property so a raid was organized.

This is the dangerous part of the operation for often the poaching gang, armed and nervous, will be in the vicinity as they were on this occasion. While the Department was able to confiscate the skins they were also shot at during the encounter.

So, not only had the Trackers / Rangers involved risked their safety in order to take the skins, but they also are now known to the poaching gang which means a further risk to them in the future. As mentioned earlier, acquiring the skins is only

an early stage of the process and by no means equates to a successful operation.

A second example comes from Polonnaruwa where a tip off led officials to a property near Wasgamowa National Park where a number of leopard skins, bones, teeth and claws were rumoured to be kept. A "buy" was organized and the guilty party apprehended with little fanfare.

However this individual was able to significantly reduce his fine by stating that the four leopards (the skins of which were presented as evidence) had come to eat his cattle.

Four leopards coming, one after the other, to prey on a farmer's cow is not typical leopard behaviour. However by making this claim, the farmer has invoked his right to protect his property thus substantially reducing any penalty and making bail much easier to obtain.

He then had the audacity to mention to one of those involved in the raid that "...if you want anything, you come to me", in reference to leopard products. This remark and the entire court proceedings underline the contempt people have for the wildlife laws at present in Sri Lanka.

At the moment it is next to impossible to combat certain aspects of the illegal trade in leopard products because the markets, especially for tiger bone (for which leopard bones are routinely substituted), are so poorly understood. Tiger bones have a symbolic and **fiercely guarded place in Chinese medical history** with

ancient texts extolling the virtues of almost every imaginable part of the animal for one illness or the other.

So, the reluctance of many to change what they see as cherished tradition makes mitigating the damage to wildcat populations that much harder. That the majority of purported tiger bone products sold in the United States (mostly to its large Chinese and Korean populations) contain no trace of tiger bone only complicates the issue, making regulations very difficult to implement.



The skins of 3 adult and 1 young leopard being measured for research records. Pix by W. Dittus.

Exposing tiger bone medicines as being fakes or as containing leopard bone is not easy because individual preparations vary to such a degree. Even if this could be done what then? When dealing with age-old traditions it is important to define the parameters of the problem within their cultural context before proposing solutions.

In Sri Lanka too

The situation is similar in Sri Lanka. In the past trade bans combined with publicity campaigns have been moderately successful in relation to ivory, turtle shell and various furs. However, the realm of traditional medicine provides a different and more deep-rooted challenge requiring more research and, perhaps, a different approach.

If the poaching threat posed to leopards in Sri Lanka is to be reduced, a great deal of effort must be put into the investigation of leopard product markets and the supply routes utilized to meet these demands. Furthermore the effectiveness of

existing wildlife laws depend entirely on the degree to which they are implemented.

More stringent implementation requires increased resources, initiative and a more efficient, independent and impartial court procedure. This can only come from **concerted governmental efforts**.

Now!

Incidents of poaching are difficult to quantify but appear to be pervasive while general human / leopard conflict is on the rise with encroachment becoming a more pressing issue in a country surpassing 19 million people and a limited amount of leopard habitat.

Action is required before the situation becomes acute for this remarkable feline. A unique subspecies which is so much a part of Sri Lanka's natural and cultural history, **it requires dedicated action** to ensure that it also remains a valuable part of the country's future.



When the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again.

William Beebe (Ornithologist/Oceanographer)