

# **AN EXPLORATORY VISIT TO THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN: SOME THOUGHTS AND COMMENTS**

Chris & Mathilde Stuart, 1996

The purpose of the trip to Yemen (15 April- 28 April 1996) was to investigate the feasibility of undertaking a major faunal survey of selected areas of that country in the future. The following comments summarise our observations, findings and conclusions.

The highlands of western Yemen, stretching from the vicinity of At Turbah in the south, to the border with Saudi Arabia in the north, have been settled and cultivated by man for more than 2000 years. Yemen has a human population of approximately 18 million, and has one of the world's highest birth rates. Throughout our period in these mountains we were virtually never out of the sight of villages and hamlets, or terraced fields. Although we were severely limited when interviewing rural people because of the lack of a suitable translator, it became abundantly clear that virtually every mammal and bird was considered fair-game by the male sector of the populace. The abundance of firearms and their ready availability ensures that any species considered to be edible or a nuisance is killed.

Although there are a few relatively small montane areas that could perhaps be suitable for conservation purposes, the following points mitigate against the setting aside of suitably large blocks of land:

1. Terraced cultivation is widespread and dedicated primarily to the production of khat. The chewing of the leaves of this bush (a mild stimulant) is a deeply entrenched tradition amongst Yemenis.
2. Villages and hamlets are located throughout the western montane block, even in seemingly impossible locations, such as on sharp-pointed peaks and razor-backs. Many of these settlements are served by driveable (4x4) jeep-tracks. Unlike a number of Third World countries with which we are familiar, there seems to be very little in the way of rural depopulation and increased urbanisation. At this stage in the development of Yemen it would, in our opinion, not be possible to move people out of villages that lie within areas deemed suitable for conservation purposes. This is further complicated by the obvious inter-tribal and clan tensions that exist.
3. The presence of large numbers of domestic livestock, most particularly goats and sheep, in the mountain block, results in severe over-grazing/browsing, competition with any wild ungulate species that may survive and probably form the bulk of the prey taken by remnant populations of leopard and wolf.
4. The abundance and ready availability of firearms and ammunition, and total lack of control over their use, indicate to us that any conservation programmes aimed to protect, in particular, predators and wild ungulates would be largely ineffective. Whilst talking to villagers in many

locations it became abundantly clear that if the opportunity arose virtually every wild animal is shot. According to information we received the proliferation of modern firearms escalated dramatically following the 1986 revolution. It is telling, that in a number of areas where we were told that gazelles and ibex were relatively abundant up until that year but were now believed to be extinct.

5. Another matter of major concern is the presence of very large numbers of feral dogs. Firstly, these animals run in packs and certainly hunt any wild animal they can catch and overpower, and secondly they would readily interbreed with the presumably small Arabian wolf population surviving in the mountains of Yemen.

6. Although various government agencies, with foreign support, such as the Environmental Protection Council, are starting to draft environmental and conservation legislation, it is difficult to see how they can be put into practice given the prevailing conditions. In many of the rural areas we visited the rule of law is to a large extent ineffective and in many cases non-existent; central government (Sa'ana) has its hands full with many issues and conservation seemingly has an extremely low profile.

7. There are three areas that warrant investigation, namely the montane block to the north of Sa'da and extending into Saudi Arabia; the sands (Ramlat as Sabatayn and Ramlat Dahm) that lie to the east and north of Ma'rib; and the extensive Hadramawt and Mahrah that stretch to the border with Oman. The first two mentioned are considered to be unstable and potentially dangerous and therefore do not feature on our agenda at this stage! The Hadramawt and Mahrah possibly hold the last viable larger mammal populations in Yemen and although there are some potential security risks a properly constituted expedition would be worthwhile.

A few comments on certain species or groups follow:

Although the Yemen has the Arabian Peninsula's greatest diversity of vertebrate species, many, in particular the larger forms, are now close to extinction, or seriously threatened.

Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* still occur widely in the western mountains but presumably in very low numbers. Although it is claimed that the various leopards that have been put on display in Sa'na, as well as many of those killed, come from the Wadah area to the north of Raydah, we personally doubt this. We encountered many different versions of the same stories and will in due course put together a more comprehensive note on the occurrence of leopard in western Yemen, which will to a large extent be based on interviews and our assessments.

Of the six **Ungulate** species known to have definitely occurred in Yemen, two are now almost certainly extinct- these being *Gazella bilkis* and *Oryx leucoryx*, with the remaining four, three gazelles and *Capra ibex*, being greatly reduced and probably seriously threatened. In fact in the west of the country it is unlikely that any of the wild ungulates will survive. As far as is

known populations of all four species survive in the Hadramawt.

Worthy of mention is the fact that several bird species are not hunted, in particular the vultures. In fact some municipalities have sites where dead domestic animals are dumped specifically to have them eaten by griffon vultures. At one such site we counted approximately 150 of these vultures. In general, bird diversity was great and a number of species abundant.

We intend to sift verbal records received from villagers during our brief stay for mammal species, document all bird, reptile, amphibian and fish records collected, but as we have to wait for identification confirmation in some cases these will be submitted in the near future.