



SAVING THE SRI LANKAN LEOPARD

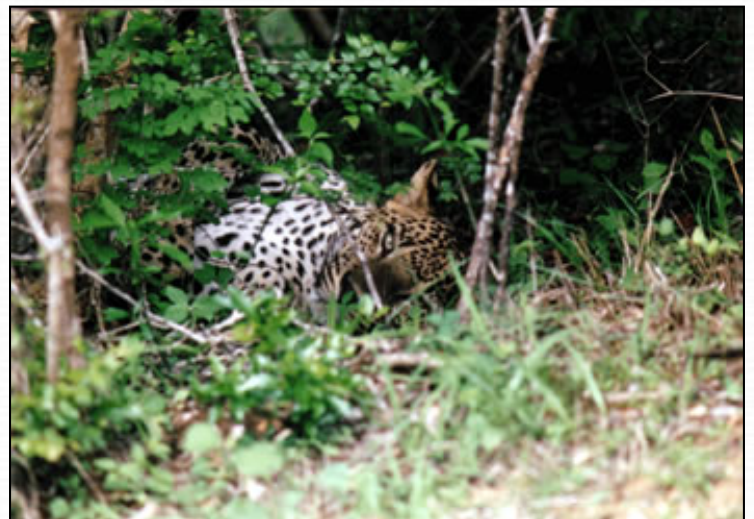
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The **SRI LANKAN LEOPARD** (*Panthera pardus kotiya*)

Recent genetic studies show that the Sri Lankan leopard is a distinct subspecies of the mainland leopard. Being the sole large carnivore in Sri Lanka drastically increases its role as a keystone species, helping to determine the population density and health of prey species such as spotted deer (*Axis axis*), sambar (*Cervus unicolor*), and wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). Another similarly is the important role of the leopard as an environmental bell weather-indicator-species, where the status of the leopard gives a good indication of the status of prey and habitat conditions. Even though the leopard in Sri Lanka occupies the role of an apex predator its population number, home range, behavior and conservation status is not very well known.



In Sri Lanka the current population of leopards in the island is unknown. What is known, however is the numbers of these elusive animals have decreased substantially over the last century. This was originally due to game hunting during colonial times and later because of poaching for its skin and meat. Though the passage of the Fauna & Flora Ordinance of 1938 gave the leopard legal protection, the poaching of leopards outside and inside protected areas has continued unabated. Poaching is still one of biggest threats to the leopard. From January 2001 to the present there have been at least 25 leopards killed by poachers. Fourteen leopards were killed in the Wasgomuwa area in the Central Province. Five leopards were killed in and around the Yala National Park and another five were killed at Uda Walawe with one leopard killed in the Nuwara Eliya region. It is obvious that many more leopards must be killed island-wide that go unrecorded. The situation of the leopard is further exacerbated by the burgeoning human population and their need for land. Habitat loss and fragmentation has contributed to the marginalization of the leopard bringing it into conflict with humans as evident from the recent reports of leopards causing concern in the tea estates around Hantana. These leopards have begun to prey on dogs since human encroachment into their habitat has reduced their habitat and depleted their natural prey base.



Above : Two leopards that were killed by poachers in the Yala National Park
Top Right: The elusive leopard

Andrew Kittle and Anjali Watson are two biologists who have been conducting a field study of the Sri Lanka leopard in and around Yala National Park since February 2001. Their study is focused on finding out the home range, demography, behavior and conservation status of the Sri Lankan leopard.



Andrew Kittle



Anjali Watson

Since January 2002, the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society has been supporting their efforts to understand this elusive top carnivore of Sri Lanka. The SLWCS has provided Andrew and Anjali with an initial grant to begin a camera-trapping program of the leopard to better understand its home range, behavior and density. Long-term studies are crucial to fully understand the dynamics of large carnivores in relation to their habitat and prey. The SLWCS is committed to supporting this program over the long-term, and welcomes the generous support of all who are concerned about Sri Lanka's dwindling wildlife.

Andrew Kittle and Anjali Watson can be contacted at aalanka@sltnet.lk AND there is a lot more information at their [website](#)

For more information e-mail us at info@SLWCS.org

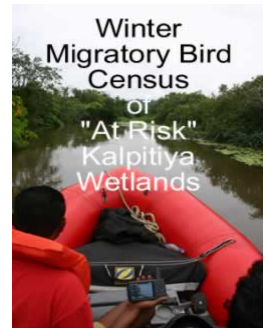
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VISION: To help protect and conserve the diminishing biodiversity of Sri Lanka and to make the local and international community aware of its endangered status.

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The camera component of the Trailmaster 1500 camera trap set-up

One of the older resident males (approx: 10 years) triggering a camera trap in the night



The omnivorous sloth bear captures his image in a camera trap. Like the leopard, sloth bears increase their activity levels at night". "A wild boar sets off the camera trap

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Project Focus - Leopard Ecology and Conservation

The main thrust behind our research is the future conservation of the Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus* (kotiya)) in its natural habitat and it is to this end that we have been working. It has long been accepted that no comprehensive and cohesive species conservation strategy can be mapped out, let alone implemented without a thorough grounding in the life history of the species in question. By studying the fundamental aspects of leopard ecology and behaviour we are attempting to fill the void that currently exists in this regard in Sri Lanka. Information regarding the numbers, ranges, prey selection, ecosystemic interactions and behaviour is merely the first step toward the construction of a solid platform for a conservation plan.

In addition, working closely with leopards in the country has acted to increase our awareness of the myriad problems facing this important species. Such threats as habitat depletion and encroachment are a common phenomenon for thousands of species across the globe and they exert no less severe a pressure in Sri Lanka.

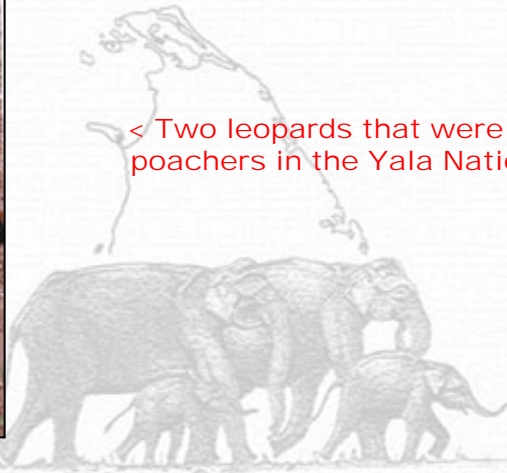
A young male leopard is entranced by a wayward plastic bag. While in this instance no harm was done, plastic represents a serious danger to wildlife as it has the potential to get stuck in the stomach or digestive tract.



While our experiences in Yala have been insightful in this regard, it is our future work in other, unprotected parts of the country that will provide a more rounded understanding of the degree to which these human-expansion induced problems exist. We are planning to document as much as possible the extent of actual and potential leopard habitat in the study areas, the connectivity between forest patches and leopard populations as well as the amount of human disturbance within these patches. This is necessary for future management planning, taking into account the spatial attributes determining leopard home range organization. Another threat that often works hand in hand with the increased leopard-human interactions resulting from habitat loss, is poaching. Together with various interested parties in Sri Lanka we are attempting to both document poaching within the country as well as attempt to understand the source of demand for leopard products locally, regionally and internationally. We have already prepared a general paper on the issue with emphasis on the need to understand and pinpoint sources of demand for leopard products. Table 1 provides an outline of the most recent poaching incidents detailed in Sri Lanka. This is thought to be a very small proportion of the actual poaching activity.



< Two leopards that were killed by poachers in the Yala National Park



The vital role that the Sri Lankan leopard plays, not only as the main predator but also the only substantial predator in the ecosystem, cannot be overstated. For this reason the leopard can truly be said to be a keystone species whose existence is essential to the present environmental balance. Removing this top cat from the arid zone environment for example, would drastically change not only the population structure of its present prey species, but would also have dramatic consequences for a host of species lower on the food chain that appear to depend at least to some degree on leopard hunting success. Furthermore with prey populations unconstrained, overgrazing has the real potential to alter the very morphology of the ecosystem.

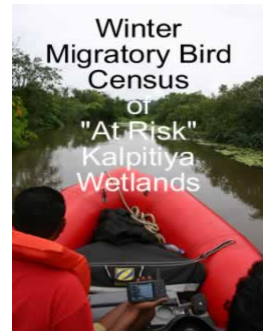
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Forming partnerships to preserve Sri Lanka's biodiversity

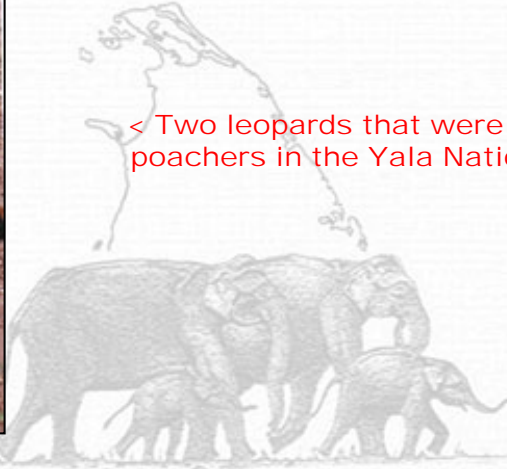
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KNOWN POACHING INCIDENTS in Sri Lanka, 1982-2002.

Date	Product Type	Origin of Product	# of Leopards	Sex/Age	Situation	Outcome
1982	Fresh leopard skins	Unknown	Eleven (11)	Unknown	Detected at Export office packed in false bottoms of boxes of gramophone cones	Unknown
1992	Skillfully prepared leopard skin	Unknown (probably from the Randenigala monatane forests)	One (1)	Unknown	Found at the airport in the luggage of a British national working on Victoria-Randenigala project	Court proceedings ended without prosecution Skin was confiscated.
1996	Skillfully prepared leopard skin	Unknown	One (1)	Unknown	Detected in outgoing parcel post	Confiscated
Oct. 2000	Leopard skin (?)	Yala National Park	One (1)	Unknown	Found in possession of ? at Nimalawa/Yala area	Confiscated
End 2000	Leopard skins	Wasgamowa National Park	Ten (10)	Unknown	Found in the possession of a individual (thought not to be the poacher but a mid man)	Confiscated by Wildlife Dept.
mid-2001	Leopard skins	Uda Walawe National Park	Five (5)	Unknown	?	Confiscated by Wildlife Dept
July, 2001	Crudely prepared leopard skins	Yala National Park	Two (2)	Appear to be ~1-1 ½ yrs	Found hidden on property during raid by Wildlife Dept officials.	Confiscated, Court proceedings ongoing
Aug, 2001	Leopard skins	Yala/Kataragama	Two (2)	Unknown	?	?
Aug, 2001	Leopard skins, bones, teeth and claws	Wasgamowa National Park	Four (4)	Two (2) males, One (1) female and One (1) young	Obtained through a Sting operation.	Confiscated. Rs 30,000 fine and bail.
Late 2001	Leopard	Nuwara Eliya area	One (1)	Adult male	Caught in a wild boar trap	No prosecution
May 2002	Leopards	Anurhadapura area	Three (3)	Mother and two young cubs	Mother killed, cubs taken as pets. Confiscated by Wildlife Dept.	Both cubs died



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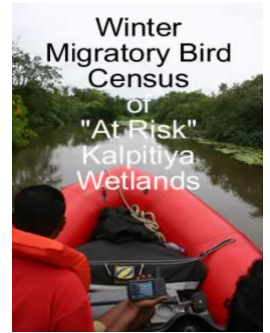
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