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School kid saved a female leopard and her cub

While most of the eight felid species of Iran are threatened, mainly from poaching by local communities at reserve boundaries due to livestock depredation, as a result of two year educational programme in surrounding villages of the Bamu National Park, a female leopard *Panthera pardus* and her cub were saved from poaching by a school kid. After killing a goat inside corral, leopards would have been shot or poisoned in a retaliatory action, but this didn't happen as the kid informed his parents on significance of endangered Persian leopards. A reproducing female leopard is a crucial member for long-term survival of the six adult leopards identified from camera trapping in the park.

Bamu National Park (BNP) is one of the remaining strongholds of the endangered Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* population in Iran and an important site for its global survival. Since 2007, the Persian leopard project (PLP) of the Plan for the Land Society, has been working on different aspects of leopard research and conservation in this site. From 2009 these efforts have been directed toward local community awareness-raising and human-leopard conflict resolution. The rate of poaching and encroachment in BNP is the highest among many reserves in Iran. The BNP is surrounded by ten villages and the Shiraz city to the south, and long-term survival of the wildlife in this park requires participation of local communities in conservation. Following a year of status assessment of leopard population using camera traps, we gradually shifted to educational programmes as the level of conflict between park officials and local communities was severely high. Around 20,000 people live in villages around Bamu (excluding the Shiraz city) and poaching, habitat encroachment and illegal livestock grazing has increased in the past decade in the periphery of the BNP. This threatens BNP to become a fragmented habitat with no connectivity with other natural landscapes. Educating younger generation plays an important role in developing a sense of responsibility towards nature conservation in the society and it can be influential on the parents too. Therefore, from May 2009 to May 2010, PLP organized workshops on importance of wildlife and Persian leopard for all school children, from elementary to high school, in the ten villages around BNP. In total, 3,200 students attended these workshops aging seven to 17. Different packages were prepared for three age classes of students

(7-10, 11-14 and 15-17) containing booklets on BNP and Persian leopard, paint books and a rucksack with the slogan "I protect the Persian leopards in BNP", which were disseminated after the workshops. Students were also encouraged to send their drawings of leopard and nature conservation to the PLP and attend the festival for Persian leopard in January 2011. Best artworks received prizes and the lessons from the workshops were reviewed among 400 students who attended the festival. Students generally responded very well to the education, and feedbacks from their parents and teachers were indeed positive.

Encouragingly, an incident proved a rapid effect of our educational program. In September 2009, a female leopard with cub attacked a livestock corral and killed a goat in a village around BNP. In such circumstan-

ces, the blamed animal will be usually shot or poisoned illegally. However, a kid who had attended the educational workshops stopped his parents from such action and shared his information on significance of Persian leopard using the PLP booklet. The farmer contacted BNP game wardens and received compensation, and the kid was praised during the leopard festival. Only six leopard individuals have been identified in the BNP camera trapping study and killing an adult female leopard with cub could be irrecoverable for such a fragile population. This supports effectiveness of awareness-raising among local communities in our study.

The PLP intends to continue its conservation effort in BNP and other leopard reserves in Iran and start developing participatory monitoring techniques for wildlife in the future. So far, the capacity building programmes in high-conflict areas has resulted in positive impact and PLP pursues funding to continue the conservation effort on Persian leopard in the future.

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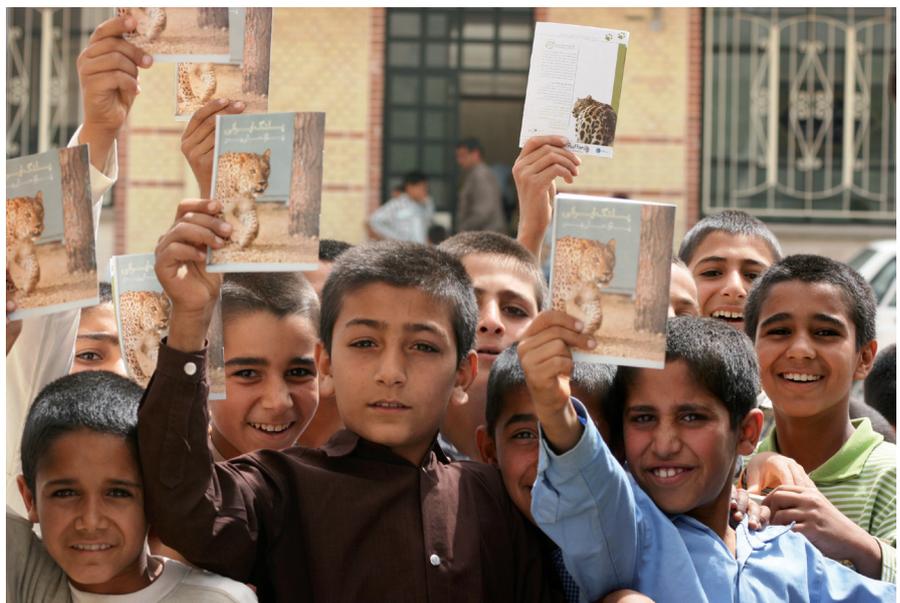


Fig.1. Students of a village around Bamu National Park, after completing their educational course and receiving leopard booklets (Photo A. Ghoddousi).