

WCS Afghanistan Biodiversity Conservation Project

A Preliminary Assessment of Wildlife Trade in Afghanistan



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Introduction

A walk down Kabul's Chicken Street, a popular tourist shopping destination, or a visit to Ka Farushi, the bird market, makes the presence of wildlife trade in Afghanistan, both in furs and birds, abundantly clear. By taking a look back at the historical information available on the fur trade from the 1970's and comparing that data to what we're seeing now in Kabul, we begin to get a sense of how the wildlife trade market has changed and the impacts that the trade is having on Afghanistan's wildlife populations. In order to help conserve some of the world's most endangered species, including the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) and the saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*), the wildlife trade market in Afghanistan must be better understood.



Common leopard pelt.

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Historical trade patterns

The last in-depth survey of the trade of wild animal furs was conducted by Willem F. Rodenburg and the FAO in 1977. Rodenburg's survey followed a three year ban on hunting from 1973 to 1976. The ban resulted in an increase of exports of furs in the initial year of the ban when sellers were exporting heavily in order to reduce their stockpiles. In 1974, the government of Afghanistan instituted a stamping certification program to distinguish legal, pre-ban furs from newly hunted pelts. After the initial increase in exports, legal exports fell in the second and third years of the ban, but instead an increase in smuggling through Pakistan occurred, which is often how European

exports were channeled, and other illegal activity such as counterfeit stamping began to occur.

It was estimated in the 1970's that 25,000 Afghan people depended on the fur trade for their incomes and that the value of the market was approximately \$3.25 million. At a minimum, over 400,000 fur-bearing animals were being killed annually to support the Kabul fur markets. The most commonly seen species in the fur markets in Kabul were Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*), Jackal (*Canis aureus*) and Desert Cat (*Felis lybica*).

In 1986, Afghanistan ratified CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. All import and export of species listed in Appendices I, II and III of the Convention must be authorized through a licensing system, which in Afghanistan is managed by the Forests and Range Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food. Then in 2005, President Karzai issued a proclamation asking that the hunting of animals and birds be avoided for 5 years, to help increase their populations in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Justice further banned the issuance of hunting licenses for a period of ten years. Though news of the ban was widely broadcast on television and radio, specific penalties have not been published and enforcement of the hunting ban seems lacking. The Environment Law of 2006 also indicates that any violations of CITES can be punishable by imprisonment or cash fines. CITES continues to actively monitor the trade of species of concern from Afghanistan, and in one example case, has recommended a complete suspension of trade of saker falcons as of January 1, 2007.

WCS has begun a household consumption survey to determine how much Afghans hunt or have hunted in the past, what species they hunt and why, as well as to interview them on their opinions about hunting. Over 400 individuals in Kabul have been interviewed so far and none of the interviewees admitted to hunting now, as the vast majority was aware of the hunting ban, but they did share their past hunting experiences. The most common reason given for having hunted in the past was for recreation, followed by food, and the species hunted ranged from birds (quails, partridges, pigeons and ducks) to porcupines, wild boar, Bactrian deer and wolf. The most commonly cited reason for why they no longer hunt anymore was that there are no animals left to hunt.

Current trade patterns

Despite a hunting ban having been issued almost two years ago, there is no dearth of shops selling furs and there are many species of wild-caught birds to be found at Ka Farushi. Just along Walayat Road, across from Kabul police headquarters, there are at least 8 shops selling furs. Almost every other shop on Chicken Street also carries furs. The most common species found in the fur shops in the 1970's were red fox, jungle cat and jackal. Now, one can still find a lot of red fox, and jackal, but there is an increase in lynx (*Lynx lynx isabellina*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), and common leopard (*Panthera pardus*) pelts.



Lynx furs

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Both then and now, the buyers of fur and the drivers of the fur market have been foreigners – tourists, now ISAF troops, and resident foreigners. As large mammals are on the decline, it seems that their rare pelts are becoming more attractive to buyers. The keeping of birds as pets is an old Afghan tradition, so the majority of buyers at Ka Farushi are Afghans.

WCS survey teams have begun to interview shopkeepers in Kabul where furs are sold and have covered over 40 shops with still more to go. With foreigners concentrated in Kabul, the majority of the fur market is also concentrated in Kabul, though through the interviews being conducted, we are learning about the locations of other shops, suppliers and factories around Afghanistan which will also need to be surveyed. [Include new market survey data here] Most shopkeepers proudly display their furs, though some pull their wares out from hidden compartments, rather than having them available in plain sight.



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Ka Farushi is being monitored regularly to count species of wild-caught versus captive-raised birds. More wild-caught species were found in a winter survey than in the summer, highlighting heavier trapping pressure during the winter as there is less work being done on farms and a greater variety of species due to winter migrants. WCS field teams have sighted saker falcons in the Wakhan, and are trying to help establish population data. This species of falcon is endangered and is of high concern to CITES as there has been heavy export from around all around Asia to the UAE and Saudi Arabia for use of the birds in falconry.

Birds and mammals are coming to Kabul from a variety of regions around Afghanistan. Furs are coming from as far and wide as Badakshan, Panjsher, Nuristan and Herat. Porous borders with Pakistan also facilitate wildlife trade – furs are being exported and are also getting treated and brought into Afghanistan from Pakistani factories, and birds are being trapped in Pakistan and India and coming all the way to Ka Farushi. Further analysis of other international trade routes needs to be conducted to determine if species are being sent to China, Tajikistan and other neighboring countries.

Open questions and future work

To determine the full extent of the size of the wildlife trade market in Afghanistan, there are still more interviews to be done in Kabul, and surveys will be extended outside of Kabul to other major centers of trade (Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Ghazni among others). What impact has hunting had on wildlife populations in Afghanistan over the past 30 years? WCS has documented huge declines in large mammals such as Marco Polo Sheep and Ibex, and with prey animals in decline, and continued heavy hunting pressure, a decline in fur-bearing carnivores is inevitable. WCS has begun wildlife surveys in the Wakhan and Nuristan, and continued surveys are needed to establish population sizes.

Though the legislation is in place to protect wildlife and try and increase their numbers, is there any enforcement of these regulations? The capacity of law enforcement officers, customs officers, postal workers who are shipping illegal furs, and cargo handlers, all needs to be determined. If there isn't awareness surrounding the legal framework of wildlife trade, or the knowledge and training to know how to enforce the law, trainings on the detection of illegal species need to be held, and precedents need to be set where illegal hunting or export of wildlife products is punished.

As long as there is demand for the product, the market will continue to exist – legally or illegally. WCS has begun campaigns to try reducing demand – posters, advertisements in the Afghan Scene and business cards discouraging the purchase of snow leopard pelts have been strategically placed to target foreigners. With high turnover of foreign workers and military, there needs to be a schedule of regular education and awareness campaigns that is frequently reinforced.

Recommendations

A Scientific Authority has not yet been designated for Afghanistan to work in conjunction with CITES. More needs to be known about populations of the species

being affected by wildlife trade so that recommendations can be made about sustainable hunting levels and quotas. WCS's wildlife surveys will contribute greatly to the amount of data available on species around Afghanistan, and it will be important for a scientific authority to be named to help shape policy and future legislation.

Afghanistan could consider joining the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking – started by the US State Department in 2005. Though it only has a few member nations so far, the US, UK, India, Australia and Brazil, WCS is already working with CAWT and could help to gain their support for Afghanistan. The connection of CAWT to the Department of State could mean easier access to target US troops with education and awareness campaigns.

Conclusion

The decline in wildlife in Afghanistan has been acknowledged by the government, yet there is still abundant trade of wild animal furs and birds happening right in the capital city of Kabul. More needs to be learned about the full extent and the size of the market, the full trade routes, and the number of livelihoods currently dependent on the trade in order to make fair recommendations that will help both wildlife populations and the lives of those who depend on the wildlife of Afghanistan. Certainly those foreigners that are in Afghanistan to help the country to rebuild should not be the ones to take away what little wildlife remains.

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