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PREDATORS PERSECUTED IN THE ASIR REGION, WESTERN SAUDI ARABIA

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Introduction

Predators are never popular in rural farming areas where they are viewed as actual or potential stock raiders and consequently actively persecuted where encountered. As a result of this human-predator conflict numbers of especially the bigger predators such as leopard, wolf and hyena have declined dramatically throughout their natural range in Saudi Arabia.

Globally Wolves (*Canis lupus*) are classified as Least Concern (Mech & Boitani 2008) while striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) is classified as Near Threatened (Arumugam, Wagner & Mills 2008) by the IUCN. According to Mech & Boitani (2004) 500 to 600 Arabian wolves (*C. l. pallipes* Sykes 1831) are estimated from the Arabian Peninsula while Nader (1996) views wolves with more or less stable populations in Saudi Arabia although still considered rare. Striped hyena, with populations estimated between 300 to 400 animals, is steadily declining in Saudi Arabia (Nader 1996) and expected at lower densities than wolves.

Methods & Results

Wadi Tarj is approximately 66 km northeast of An Namas (between Abha and Al Baha) in the Asir Region in western Saudi Arabia accessible along a gravel access route through extremely rugged terrain (Figure 1). On 23 February 2009 during a recent field survey to Wadi Tarj we came across 7 wolves and 1 striped hyena killed at 3 different locations. The wolves were displayed hanging from *Acacia tortilis* trees (6 individuals) and an electricity pylon (1 individual) and hyena from an *A. tortilis* tree (Figure 2). This equates to 0.02 hyenas and 0.12 wolves per km travelled probably indicative of their general densities in suitable habitat throughout the area. Skin samples were taken for genetic analyses and to determine the level of hybridisation, if any, of the wolves with domestic dogs.

These predators were hunted at night from a vehicle using a spotlight as they were held responsible for the loss of sheep in the area. Except for the skin and skull, the entire carcass of the hyena was removed. It is known that carcasses are used for medicinal purposes – e.g. to regulate blood pressure (Faisal Saeed Ashary pers com).

Other predators having been reported killed in the Wadi Tarj area include caracal (*Felis caracal*) and ratel (*Mellivora capensis*) while leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) do not occur in the area anymore although 2 individuals have recently been killed northwest of An Namas (Al Aqiqah area) in the Jebel Saker area (Faisal Saeed Ashary pers com).



Fig1. Wolves (male and female) shot and displayed as warning to other predators in the Wadi Tarj area (©Peter Cunningham).



Fig2. Location of Wadi Tarj and predator remains in south western Saudi Arabia.

Discussion

The persecution of predators throughout Saudi Arabia continues to be disconcerting. These sightings of dead wolves and hyena, which are not restricted to the Wadi Tarj area (Ernest Robinson pers com), indicate their persistence in the rugged mountainous western regions albeit presumably at low densities. Increased farming activities and the bulldozing of new routes to facilitate easier access to these farms will undoubtedly result in further human-predator conflict and the decimation of the remaining predators in these areas previously protected by their remoteness. Dogs used to protect free roaming goat herds pose an additional threat to the genetic integrity of the remaining wolves (Wronski & Macasero 2008). It is imperative to both protect wildlife; including predators in situ by employing local community rangers or capture and initiate an ex situ breeding programme to ensure the future survival of predators whose existence is on a knife's edge in Saudi Arabia.

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