

## **Wildlife Exploitation Rampant**

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Rare species are being decimated as a result of ignorance and greed.

War, illegal hunting, deforestation and drought combined with grinding poverty have had a disastrous effect on Afghanistan's wildlife, pushing some species to the verge of extinction.

According to international experts, the number of snow leopard, one of the world's rarest animals, is estimated to have slumped to around 100 in Afghanistan after losses from hunting outstripped the species' reproduction rate.

Unless the slide is halted, the animal will join the lion, wolf and Caspian tiger as species seen no more in this country.

"Afghanistan's wild animals such as the lion, leopard, fox and wolf have totally disappeared," Haji Hassan Roshan of the country's commerce ministry told IWPR. "The main reasons are the years of war, four years of drought and deforestation. The government has put a total ban on the hunting of wild animals."

The list of vanished wildlife could soon include the legendary Marco Polo sheep, a wild mountain species twice as big as any domestic animal. Its horns, curled like a corkscrew and measuring nearly two metres in length, are highly prized as a trophy for hunters, according to some experts.

One of two remaining populations of Siberian crane - another of the world's rarest species - is thought to be down to just one pair and a single chick after the United States' bombing campaign in 2001 disrupted their annual migration south.

Among other birds under threat is a species of falcon, which was once common in the mountains of Afghanistan but now rarely seen due to demand from Arab countries, where it is highly sought after for its hunting ability.

According to local businessmen in Kabul, some of these birds can fetch prices of up to 20,000 US dollars in the oil-rich Gulf sheikdoms where they are used for sport.

Wildlife experts put the blame on the devastation caused by 23 years of war. Afghanistan's mountains became strategic frontlines and animals were forced down to the valleys, where they were picked off by hungry villagers bristling with the cast off weapons of war.

"They don't understand anything about conservation. When they see a wild animal, they shoot it," said one businessman involved in trading protected species.

The long-suffering population's search for firewood for cooking and heating has reduced Afghanistan's forested area by around a third since the war began, according to some estimates, putting further pressure on wildlife.

According to the United Nations Environmental Programme, UNEP, the hunting of snow leopard appears to have increased significantly since the collapse of the Taleban regime. This is being blamed on demand from foreign aid workers and peacekeeping troops, who will pay up to 1,500 dollars for such a skin in Kabul's famous Chicken Street.

The US embassy in Kabul recently took the unusual step of urging its citizens not to buy snow leopard skins - which are covered by an international ban - warning that anyone caught trying to import them into America. could face fines of up to 250,000 dollars and a year in jail.

Mohammad Nazir, who has been selling products made of wild-animal skins at his Chicken Street shop for 25 years, offered a blanket made of wolf skin for "only 180 dollars".

"I have 28 kinds of products made from different animals. A beaver skin costs 300-400 dollars but those of wolf and fox cost 20-40 dollars," he said, declining to say where the pelts originated.

Businessmen in Chicken Street also reported there was an active trade in rare birds - particularly hunting birds popular in the Middle East - and deer, which are captured at birth and sold to local businessmen and foreigners for 50 dollars a head, which is equivalent to one month's average wage in this country.

A high-ranking official in the agriculture department in Mazar province, who did not want to be named, accused corrupt local commanders of playing a big part in the trade of birds and deer, "They are taking their cut from the businessmen who are catching them. As long as they are in power, we can't touch them, and the trade will continue."

One of the businessmen involved, Mohammad Kabir, told IWPR, "We know that our business has a lot of negative effects on our wildlife, but what can we do? Government jobs don't pay anything, so we are forced to do this. If we could find a job with a decent salary we would give this up straight away."

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