How the leopard lost its spot Big cat's territory vanishes

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One of the world's most iconic big cats, the leopard (*Panthera pardus*), has lost as much as 75 per cent of its historic range according to a new study from international conservation charity the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and the National Geographic Society's Big Cats Initiative (BCI).

Published today in the scientific journal *PeerJ*, this research – conducted in partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Cat Specialist Group and Panthera – represents the first known attempt to produce a comprehensive analysis of leopards' status across their entire range and all nine subspecies.

The study found that leopards historically occupied a vast range of approximately 35 million square kilometres (13.5 million square miles) throughout Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Today, however, they are restricted to just 8.5 million square kilometers (3.3 million square miles) approximately. To obtain their findings, the scientists spent three years reviewing more than 1,300 sources on the big cat's historic and current range.

The results appear to confirm conservationists' suspicions that, while the entire species is not yet as threatened as some other big cats, leopards are actually facing a multitude of growing threats in the wild, and three subspecies have already been almost completely eradicated. While African leopards face considerable threats, particularly in North and West Africa, leopards have also almost completely disappeared from several regions across Asia, including much of the Arabian Peninsula and vast areas of former range in China and Southeast Asia. The amount of habitat in each of these regions is plummeting, having declined by nearly 98 percent. Arabian leopards face additional challenges as they are the only subspecies with less than 10 percent of its remaining range occurring within protected areas. Worldwide, approximately 17 percent of existing leopard range is under some formal protection.

Lead author Andrew Jacobson, of ZSL's Institute of Zoology, University College London (UCL) and BCI, states: "The leopard is a famously elusive animal, which is likely why it has taken so long to recognise its global decline. This study represents the first of its kind to assess the status of the leopard across the globe and all nine subspecies. Our results challenge the previous assumption that in many areas, leopards remain relatively abundant and not seriously threatened."

"This underscores the pressing need to focus more research on the less studied subspecies, three of which have been the subject of fewer than five published papers during the last 15 years. Of these subspecies, one — the Javan leopard (*P. p. melas*) — is currently classified as Critically Endangered by the IUCN, while another — the Sri Lankan leopard (*P. p. kotiya*) — is classified as Endangered, highlighting the urgent need to understand what can be done to arrest these worrying declines."

Leopards are capable of surviving in human-dominated landscapes, provided they have sufficient cover, access to wild prey and tolerance from local people. In many areas, however, habitat is converted to farmland and native herbivores are replaced with livestock for growing human populations. This habitat loss, prey decline, conflict with livestock owners, illegal trade in leopard skins and parts and legal trophy hunting are all factors contributing to leopard decline.

Elaborating further, co-author Luke Dollar – Programme Director for National Geographic Society's BCI – adds: "Leopards' secretive nature – coupled with the occasional, brazen appearance of individual animals within megacities like Mumbai and Johannesburg – perpetuates the misconception that these big cats continue to thrive in the wild — when actually our study underlines the fact they are increasingly threatened."

Despite this troubling picture, some areas of the world inspire hope. Even with historic declines in the Caucasus Mountains and the Russian Far East/Northeast China, leopard populations in these areas appear to have now stabilised and may even be rebounding, with significant conservation investment through the establishment of protected areas and increased anti-poaching measures.

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