



# Time is running out for Iranian cheetah

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## INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

The Asiatic cheetah is one of the most endangered felines in the world, with the last remaining individuals of this rare species found only in parts of Iran, earning it the nickname "Iranian cheetah". Some studies have suggested that the Asiatic cheetah differs from its African counterpart in terms of size, with the African one being slightly larger. However, the distinguishing feature of the Iranian cheetah is its thicker mane, which serves to keep it warm in the harsh winters of Iran's high-altitude steppes.

Estimates from the past year or two indicate that only around 12 to 20 cheetahs can be found in the remote areas of central Iran's desert fringes. As a result, a conservation project for the Asian cheetah was launched in 2011, with extensive efforts underway to ensure the survival and prevent the extinction of this majestic animal. In collaboration with non-governmental organizations and experts, the Department of Environment has not only protected the cheetah's habitats and wildlife sanctuaries but also initiated a breeding program for the species in captivity.

The breeding program, which has seen the birth of several cubs followed by their untimely death, has yet to yield any results, leaving concerns about the continuation of the Iranian cheetah's lineage unabated. If this trend continues, it is likely that in a few years' time, the only place to find the Iranian cheetah will be in wildlife books and documentaries, and its footprints will be erased from Iran's geography, unless an urgent plan is devised to save the Iranian leopard. To gain insight into the life and status of leopards in Iran, as well as the country's leopard breeding programs, Iran Daily had an interview with Morteza Pourmirzaei, an expert and CEO of the Iranian Cheetah Society.

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**IRAN DAILY:** How many cheetahs have survived in Iran, and how do you assess the efforts made to conserve this species?

**POURMIRZAEI:** The cameras installed along the cheetah's migration routes and habitats in Iran show that fewer than 20 individuals are living in the country. All of these cheetahs are concentrated in the Semnan Province and the Turan region, towards the Miandasht Wildlife Refuge in the northeastern North Khorasan Province. The organization has made efforts and taken measures in recent years to maintain and increase the cheetah population, but these efforts have not been sustained. They have also enlisted the help of academics and independent activists, but this collaboration has not continued.

Recently, live bait was transported to the cheetah habitats for feeding, which, in my opinion, was more of a show. The Department of Environment transferred a number of rams and ewes to the south of Turan to feed the cheetahs, but cheetahs are nomadic animals that do not stay in one place. Based on this, considering that there are approximately 20 cheetahs scattered over an area of more than 2-3 million hectares,

releasing a few rams and ewes in such a vast area cannot contribute to strengthening the cheetah population.

On the other hand, it was announced last year that fencing had begun along the notorious "Cheetah Death Road". Typically, during this road, collisions between cars and cheetahs attempting to cross the road result in the animals' death. In March, it was announced that the fencing had been completed, but when we visited the area, on the Tehran-Mashhad Road between Miami and Abbasabad, only about 500 meters of the foundation had been laid, and there was no sign of the fence.

However, the good news is that with the change of government, there have been developments in the Department of Environment, and Hamid Zahrabi has been appointed as the caretaker of the Deputy of Natural Environment and Biodiversity, who is an expert in the field of natural environment conservation and collaborates openly with environmental researchers. He traveled to South Africa in 2019, accompanied by the Iranian Cheetah Association, to visit the cheetahs' living conditions, as South Africa is the only place in the world where cheetahs

have a growing population. He is also familiar with the cheetah conservation program in Africa and can provide valuable assistance in this area.

**What is your assessment of the Asiatic cheetah breeding program in captivity?**

The breeding program in captivity has not yielded any positive results, and after the death of Pirooz, the only cub born in captivity, the authorities decided to keep the conservation and breeding program behind closed doors and in silence, without providing any detailed reports. They simply claim that the program is progressing.

To implement the breeding program in captivity, Firooz, the only dominant male cheetah in the region, was separated from the wild and used for breeding. This was a high-risk move for the cheetah population in the wild, as the only identified male cheetah was removed from the natural environment. The first mating of Firooz resulted in the birth of Pirooz and his brothers, all of whom have since died. In other words, the program has completely failed. It has been claimed that two breeding cycles have been completed, but no offspring have been produced.

**How many cheetahs do we currently have in the breeding program in captivity?**

In the breeding program in captivity, we have one male cheetah named Firooz and five female cheetahs named Iran, Delbar, Azar, Touran, and Gisoo. Azar and Touran are two female cheetahs that were captured by a shepherd about two years ago, allegedly after being separated from their mother. Another cheetah, Gisoo, was captured in the north of Turan last year, when she was about a year old, and was transferred to the breeding center. However, the fate of her mother is unknown - whether she was killed or not. We do not even know if she had any siblings. In short, the breeding program in captivity has not achieved any results so far.

**Is there any hope for the breeding program in captivity?**

As an expert, I must speak based on evidence and documentation. I need to see Firooz's sperm report to determine whether, as the only male in captivity, he is still fertile. If he is, then why has there been no successful breeding so far? If his fertility has decreased or disappeared, it needs



Morteza Pourmirzaei

