

From Pirouz to Helia

No tough decisions, no future for Asiatic cheetah: Researcher

**INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE**

The Asiatic cheetah, also known as the Iranian cheetah and the nation's emblematic wildlife species and the sole surviving representative anywhere on Earth, has, for many years, subsisted upon the precipice of extinction. Notwithstanding the implementation of diverse conservation initiatives, ranging from captive propagation to the execution of programs intended to diminish roadway fatalities, numerous questions concerning the efficacy of these measures, the authentic demographic status of the cheetah population, and the prospective destiny of this invaluable species, continue to persist. Conversely, the dissemination of encouraging reports, such as the successful reproduction of certain cheetahs in the wild, together with accounts of habitat contraction and the perpetuation of existential threats, has rendered an exact appraisal of the species' condition more consequential than ever before.

Under such circumstances, the absence of a systematic and scientifically rigorous monitoring framework, disagreements concerning the actual number of surviving cheetahs, the fate of the captive-breeding program, the imperative necessity of genetic investigations, and even the proposition of employing African cheetahs to avert the extinction of the Asiatic cheetah, have all turned into contentious subjects among specialists.

To scrutinize these issues, Iran Daily conducted an exclusive interview with Morteza Pourmirzai, a wildlife conservationist, researcher, Asiatic cheetah specialist, and chief executive officer of the Sarvin Wildlife Conservation. Having devoted many years to the study and monitoring of the Asiatic cheetah, and having also served for several years as the CEO of the Iranian Cheetah Society, he elucidated the latest condition of the Asiatic cheetah, while addressing the challenges of conservation, the deficiencies of executive programs, the destiny of the captive-breeding project, the status of habitats, and the strategies capable of extricating this invaluable species from the crisis of extinction. The complete transcript of the translated interview appears below.

Morteza Pourmirzai



IRAN DAILY: How do you evaluate the current condition of the Asiatic cheetah? Some contend that the situation has improved, whereas others maintain that it has remained unchanged or has even deteriorated. What is your perspective regarding this matter?

POURMIRZAI: The indispensable prerequisite for asserting that a demographic alteration has occurred within the cheetah population, and subsequently evaluating whether that alteration has been beneficial or otherwise, consists of one element alone: population monitoring. In other words, the population must undergo proper and scientifically rigorous monitoring. Upon the foundation of an almost integrated monitoring system, the antecedent and subsequent findings must undergo comparative evaluation, and only thereafter may one ascertain what alteration has transpired and whether the situation has ameliorated or deteriorated.

At present, the previous form of monitoring has entirely ceased to exist. Limited camera-trap deployment persists only within certain sectors of the Touran region, and even that activity is not conducted by a specialized team. Rather, an interested individual who had connections with environmental authorities has installed several cameras there. For approximately the last two years, we ourselves have not received authorization for camera deployment. Consequently, I myself cannot inform you

whether conditions have improved or worsened. Perhaps they have improved; perhaps they have not. Nevertheless, the most precise response I can furnish is that I simply do not know. Indeed, nobody else knows either because no precise monitoring or surveillance has been conducted.

However, as a researcher, upon the basis of the available evidence and activities, what is your assessment of the present situation?

As a researcher in this field, upon the basis of the available evidence, activities, and measures undertaken for the cheetah, I can present an evaluation of the current situation. At present, activities concerning the cheetah are conducted in a relatively systematic manner by the Department of Environment, and this organization, pursuant to its responsibilities and institutional procedures, performs a variety of tasks. For instance, it recruits new game wardens. The most recent announcement, approximately one year ago, indicated that eight individuals had been recruited, although the status of their contract renewals remains indeterminate. Several others had already been employed previously. Nevertheless, for a species confronting an exceptionally elevated risk of extinction, considerably more comprehensive measures are required. Recruiting eight game wardens, whose continued employment has not yet been confirmed, does not constitute a substantial ac-

complishment. For example, the Touran Protected Area possesses approximately 30 to 35 game wardens. This number is inadequate for a habitat encompassing 1.5 million hectares, within which only half that number — namely 15 wardens — conduct patrols during each shift. In practical terms, each game warden bears responsibility, on average, for safeguarding 100,000 hectares, and the reality is that no individual game warden possesses the capacity to protect 100,000 hectares. Consequently, proclaiming the recruitment of eight auxiliary personnel cannot be regarded as a noteworthy achievement for cheetah conservation.

What deficiencies exist regarding the collection of cheetah-related data?

With respect to the collection of cheetah-related data, the prevailing methodologies are unscientific and devoid of professional rigor. Moreover, the monitoring and census of ungulate (hoofed) species are considerably less complicated than those of carnivorous species because, among ungulates, observers may approach herds more closely, enumerate individuals through direct observation, and subsequently announce statistical estimates. Conversely, conducting a population census of carnivorous animals is by no means so straightforward because such animals deliberately avoid visibility and rapidly flee. Indeed, throughout approximately 17 years devoted to

cheetah research and field exploration, I have personally observed a cheetah only twice.

Consequently, an unequivocal assertion that, for example, "upon the basis of camera registrations and monitoring, we possess 20 cheetahs," cannot possess a particularly high degree of precision. Furthermore, within these monitoring efforts, recently, cubs have occasionally been incorporated into the reported population totals, whereas, from a scientific perspective, a cub cannot be considered part of the population until it has attained independence from its mother. Approximately two years after birth, cheetahs gradually become independent and commence reproduction. In other words, within an approximately three-year interval, they achieve independence and enter the breeding population. Only after reaching the age of three, if a photographic record is obtained, may we affirm that one additional individual has entered our recognized population. Otherwise, prior to that stage, innumerable contingencies could result in its mortality.

One encouraging development concerning the cheetah was that "Helia," a female cheetah inhabiting the Miandasht Wildlife Refuge in North Khorasan Province, gave birth to five cubs. More recently, however, reports initially indicated that two cubs had disappeared, and subsequently asserted that two cubs had been observed independently of their

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mother within the region. What is your opinion concerning this matter?

Helia's successful reproduction in the wild during the past year, producing five cubs, constituted extraordinarily auspicious news for the cheetah population and revitalized hopes for the continuation of the Asiatic cheetah lineage and the prevention of its extinction. Subsequently, reports emerged that two cheetahs had been observed in Miandasht, accompanied by assertions that they were Helia's remaining cubs, which had attained independence earlier than expected. Scientifically, however, that interpretation is erroneous. Those two cubs have, in all probability, not yet attained independence, and their survival remains imperiled. Our supposition is that they most likely became separated from their mother because of circumstances such as pursuit by hunters or livestock herders.

On certain occasions, individuals pursuing photographic opportunities also pursue cheetahs with motorcycles, and such actions may fragment family groups. Ordinarily, cheetah cubs do not separate from their mothers before reaching 18 months of age. The probability that such an involuntary separation occurred is exceedingly high. Fortunately, however, the two cubs remained together and therefore possess the capacity to hunt cooperatively.

Consequently, the assertion by certain officials that these cubs achieved premature independence

A male Asiatic cheetah named Koushki is seen in the Miandasht Nature Reserve, North Khorasan Province, Iran, on September 3, 2014.

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