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Norman Myers

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EDITORIAL

The Leopard in Africa: Biological and Cultural Realities

Norman Myers, Editorial Advisory Board

The leopard in Africa may once again come under pressure from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is considering the prospect of changing the leopard's legal status from endangered to threatened, thus opening it up to sport hunting. The motivation is to enable American hunters to bring leopard skin trophies back to the United States.

In my opinion, this would be a mistaken move at the present time. I offer this opinion on the basis of 23 years residence in Africa, during which time I have visited 44 countries in the region south of the Sahara, many of them repeatedly. In the early 1970s, I conducted a two-year survey for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to assess the status of the leopard (also the cheetah) throughout its range in sub-Saharan Africa. My 1975 report to IUCN and WWF proposed, among its recommendations, that when a proper time arrived, the leopard could become available for exploitation not only through sport hunting but also through sustained cropping for the fur trade and for other purposes that would entail utilizing the leopard's pelt as a high-value trophy. For institutional rather than biological reasons, however, I believed in 1975 and I still believe that a "proper time" has not yet arrived.

True, the leopard's biological status is not as bad as that of most wildlife species in Africa. A highly resourceful and secretive creature, the leopard is rarely seen, yet it retains "satisfactory" numbers in at least one dozen countries—"satisfactory" in comparison to other species such as the lion, the cheetah and the crocodile. Of course the leopard's numbers are often poor if not appalling compared with what they could be through systematic and comprehensive safeguards, notably with respect to illegal hunting of the leopard for its skin and widespread poisoning of the animal as a livestock protection measure. The leopard is still *relatively* numerous in the rainforest countries of equatorial Africa (Zaire, Congo and Gabon). It also retains moderate numbers, *i.e.*, it is still far from being eliminated (though declining, sometimes fast), in Tanzania, southern Sudan, Zambia, Cameroon, Botswana and possibly Mozambique. In several other countries (Kenya, western forest of Ethiopia, Central African Republic and possibly Angola), the leopard is still years away from "disaster status", though its numbers are a mere fraction of what they were in 1960 and continue to decline rapidly. As a result of exceptional and progressively severe pressures during the last two decades, the leopard has been all but extirpated in virtually all other countries included in its range.

To be sure, a few individuals still hang on here and there; the leopard is more resilient and persistent and adaptable than almost all other major kinds of wildlife, and leopard are still occasionally to be encountered in the city limits of Nairobi. But "conservation" speaks of a different sort of status, and "survival outlook" surely goes beyond a few relic animals that somehow survive in odd corners. It is therefore grossly incorrect, even within narrowly conceived limits, to state, as did an article in *Science* dated 18 April 1980, that the leopard exists with populations that are "large" by any significant measure in all countries ex-

cept Somalia. In my considered opinion, and in a professional "wildlife management" sense of term, the leopard's populations are *not* "large" in three quarters of the the countries in question. Furthermore, the leopard's numbers are fast dwindling: If we can judge by the experience of South Africa, it is possible through the use of poison as a livestock protection method to eliminate the leopard from broad stretches of territory in just a few years. Several countries, especially the beef-producing countries of Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, are increasingly utilizing poison to get rid of wild predators in livestock areas.

The main problem, however, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife's proposal is not really the species' biological status. After all, sport hunting would take off no more than a few hundred animals each year, which, when spread across several countries, would be of trifling biological consequence. The main problem is institutional, socio-cultural and economic. Wildlife agencies in emergent Africa are not yet capable, even if inclined, to regulate wildlife resources in a sufficiently effective manner. Corruption is rife in many if not most countries in question. If the door to exploitation is opened an inch, e.g., for sport hunters, a flood gate may burst open, admitting all manner of illicit activities. No matter how well-intentioned the hunting fraternity may be (and they often proclaim that they are no worse and no better than humanity at large), it is naive to suppose that wildlife management measures that might work in the United States could somehow be made to work in developing Africa, where an illegal leopard skin can more than double one month's salary for a wildlife manager or a customs official, and match a whole year's cash income for a game scout or a subsistence peasant. It is not true that sport hunting of the leopard would assist rural communities and thereby foster a favorable attitude toward the leopard; most of the hunter's dollar goes into the pocket of the safari company that he engages and the bank accounts of hotels, game lodges and other large entrepreneurs. In a handful of areas, a portion of license fees, etc. are allocated to local "district councils", and the funds can then be used to build schools and the like, but that is altogether different from saying that the hunter's expenditures accrue to the peasant whose sheep and calves may be taken by leopards. If a peasant loses livestock worth \$100, he does not feel compensated by receiving a share of a dispensary built through hunters' fees. The key factor is an acceptable apportionment of costs and benefits, as perceived by the man with a calf and with a spear to defend his calf.

Conservation of all wildlife throughout Africa faces enough problems without the further complications that would undoubtedly arise from sport hunting of the leopard within the foreseeable future. The issue encompasses more than the leopard's biological status and more than a single species. It reflects a host of questions that relate directly to the survival of wildlife in general. Well-meaning individuals in the United States may wish to view the situation in a narrower perspective, and within a context of their experience of wildlife management in developed parts of the world. However, to consider the "leopard question" in these terms is simplistic, taking next to no account of the principal determining factors of wildlife conservation in Africa, these factors being cultural, social, economic, institutional, and ultimately, political. American sportsmen can suggest to African political leaders that they know what is best for African wildlife, but they do it at the potential cost of not appearing to understand the nature, not to mention the size, of the problem.