

Conservation news

New IUCN Species Survival Commission Parasite Specialist Group launched in 2023

In January 2023, a Parasite Specialist Group was created within the IUCN Species Survival Commission. This international group of researchers and practitioners will work to assess the conservation status of parasite biodiversity globally, develop recovery plans and best-practice protocols for parasite conservation, build networks and partnerships for parasite conservation, and communicate the intrinsic and functional importance of parasite species in ecosystems.

The Parasite Specialist Group faces a great challenge. Although approximately half of all animal species are parasitic during at least one life stage, few parasitic species have been assessed for the IUCN Red List or targeted for conservation efforts. Rather than considering all 15 hyperdiverse phyla of understudied and underprotected animal parasites, the Parasite Specialist Group will focus on a subset of parasite biodiversity: metazoan parasites that use vertebrate hosts. This group includes parasitic worms (Cestoda, Trematoda, Acanthocephala, Nematoda), insects (e.g. Phthiraptera, Siphonaptera, Hippoboscoidea, Oestridae, Polyctenidae, Cimicidae) and arachnids (e.g. Ixodida, Spinturnicidae, Trombiculidae). By 2025, the Parasite Specialist Group aims to have assessed the conservation status of at least one representative species of each taxonomic group.

Just as habitat conservation is critical for the conservation of free-living species, host conservation is critical for parasite conservation. Therefore, the Parasite Specialist Groups is seeking new partnerships with vertebrate conservation groups interested in finding ways to conserve parasites along with host species. For example, ex situ vertebrate conservation programmes have resulted in the extinction of some rare parasite species (e.g. the condor louse *Colpocephalum californici*), but they have also sustained some rare and endemic parasite species along with their threatened hosts (e.g. the chewing louse *Ardeicola nippon* on the crested ibis *Nipponia nippon*). An immediate priority for the new Parasite Specialist Group is to develop best practice guidelines for ex situ parasite conservation and work to with interested partners to begin new parasite co-conservation programmes.

The Parasite Specialist Group invites researchers and practitioners in the fields of parasitology, ecology, veterinary medicine and conservation to reach out with questions, requests for support or ideas for new collaborations.

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Recent illegal killing of Critically Endangered Arabian leopards in Hawf, Yemen

The Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* is Critically Endangered and endemic to the Arabian Peninsula. Once widespread across the mountainous areas of the region, it now occurs only in small and fragmented populations in Oman, Yemen and possibly Saudi Arabia, although there have been no confirmed records in the latter country since 2014. The Oman population, although small (c. 50 individuals), is considered stable, but there is little accurate information on the status of leopards in Yemen. The illegal killing of leopards continues in some areas in the south and south-east of the country, with reports since 2021 from Lawdar in Abyan, north of Lahij and Ad Dali. All are areas with ongoing civil conflict.

The leopard also occurs in the mountains of Hawf in eastern Yemen, close to the international border with Oman and outside the conflict zone. Following the report of two leopards killed in Hawf in 2014 there were no further reports until recently. Photographs posted on social media showed one animal killed in November 2022 and one in January 2023. Both killings were apparently in response to livestock depredation.

Persecution of leopards in response to actual or perceived livestock predation is one of the major causes of the local extinction of this subspecies from most of its former



An Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* caught on a camera trap in Dhofar, southern Oman (photo: Hadi Al Hikmani).

range. Although conservation interventions have mitigated leopard persecution in Oman, this is not the case in Yemen. Most worrying are the recent reports from Hawf, as it is outside the conflict zone. If killings continue, the remaining small population of the leopard in Hawf could be lost. The estimated global population of the Arabian leopard is < 200 and the species is on the edge of extinction in the wild. Regional interest in the conservation of the subspecies is high and the leopards of Yemen's Hawf mountains are an opportunity for urgent conservation intervention.

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New global alliance to help improve the practice of biodiversity conservation

The global conservation community is facing a critical moment. As climate change and anthropogenic activities such as wars and unsustainable use of resources continue to threaten biodiversity at an unprecedented rate, it is becoming increasingly clear that top-down conservation approaches have been neither sufficient nor ethically sound. Historically, these approaches have led to injustices to and marginalization of local and Indigenous communities, and to compromised long-term conservation outcomes.

An expanding group of conservationists, currently representing 23 countries and with a cumulative experience of 45 decades, working across continents and oceans, have announced the formation of the Partners Conservation Alliance. The Alliance's mission is to help improve how biodiversity conservation is practised worldwide by recognizing and empowering local and Indigenous communities.

The Alliance issued a statement on 2 December 2022, in Kashka Suu village of the Kyrgyz Republic, ahead of the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal. The Kashka Suu Statement highlights the need to recognize the role of local and Indigenous people in biodiversity conservation. Initiatives built upon respectful, ethical and resilient partnerships with local and Indigenous communities are the most effective and morally defensible conservation approach, not just to address biodiversity loss but also for sustainable economic development. It is noteworthy that community-led biodiversity conservation programmes can address 10–13 of the 17 sustainable development goals set by the United Nations. The Kashka Suu statement was referenced by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic at the Conference of the Parties in Montreal.

During a 5-day workshop in Kashka Suu village, leading to the Statement, a core group of the Partners Conservation Alliance also committed itself to creating and offering training toolkits and resources for conservation practitioners, to help them engage local and Indigenous communities and strengthen their ownership and conservation leadership. The Alliance plans to offer training in various locations, and the first training course was delivered in Kenya in February 2023.

The Partners Conservation Alliance is determined to help strengthen conservation efforts worldwide by empowering local and Indigenous communities and ensuring their voices are heard in the global conversation about biodiversity conservation. It is time for conservation to be rebuilt on a foundation of respect, equity, transparency, accountability and partnership.

The Kashka Suu Statement on Global Biodiversity Conservation is available at globalsnowleopard.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Partners-conservation-alliance-Statement.pdf

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