



Nature-Iraq
House 25, Street 27
Ashti District 104, Sulaimani
Kurdistan Region, Iraq
+964 53 329 2007

Publication No.: NI-0409-001

Conservation of Iraq Mammals

Nature Iraq is an Iraqi environmental organization working throughout Iraq on biodiversity and environmental restoration. It has been conducting yearly seasonal surveys in Iraq since 2005 on areas of key biodiversity throughout the country. These surveys have focused on birds, fish, plants, and other biota as well as water quality.

Scientific research on mammals in Iraq has not been conducted in well over 30 years and requires special training, methods, and equipment not currently available in the country. Nature Iraq urges caution where these species are concerned because of the poor information on their status within Iraq. Hunting and habitat destruction is currently uncontrolled within Iraq and many species are being extirpated locally and regionally.

Basing on current knowledge about the conservation status of many of these very shy animal species and the known pressures of uncontrolled hunting and habitat destruction, we must conclude that the local conservation status of many of these species within Iraq is potentially threatened.

Further, it is the scientific opinion of the staff of Nature Iraq and regional experts consulted by this organization that there is no need for persecution of any species of native mammal in Iraq. The native mammals of Iraq pose no significant danger to humans, display a very low incident rate for rabies and other diseases, and in fact in many cases provide important controls of small rodents, insects, arthropods, and reptiles that do pose potential health hazards to humans.

Native Felines

Native cats in Iraq such as the Jungle cat, Wildcat, Caracal, and Sand cat are not aggressive towards humans. Recent studies across Africa, Asia, and Europe indicate that these small native cats may be far more imperiled than previously thought. Of particular concern is the status of the Wildcat and the Jungle cat, both of which were previously thought to be common and widespread. The Wildcat, it is now known, is threatened both by human persecution and genetic dilution with feral cats. The Jungle cat, limited to very specific and limited wetland habitat in Iraq, is severely pressured by habitat destruction, uncontrolled hunting, and poisoning by farmers targeting other species. The Caracal is likewise threatened by poisoning and uncontrolled hunting. The opinion of Nature Iraq is that all native cats should be fully protected.

Native Canines

Native canines such as the Striped hyena, Golden jackal, Sand fox, Red fox, Fennec fox, Arabian wolf, and (if still extant in Iraq) the Syrian wolf, are not aggressive towards humans and play critical roles in the environment. They are the prime controllers of rodents in the

wild, and also critical in cleaning carrion from the desert floor. Native canines are under particular pressure in Iraq due to uncontrolled persecution by herders and cultural stigma attached to some of these species. The Striped hyena is thought to be near-threatened as a species and may warrant threatened status in Iraq. Native canines are particularly vulnerable to un-scientific wildlife management, which tends to eliminate foxes out of proportion to other canines. The usual result is the elimination of the smallest and largest canines, and the expansion of Red foxes and Golden jackals. These results are neither beneficial nor desirable, and may cause long term damage to the ecosystem.



Wolf pups for sale in the market



European porcupine in the market

Other native mammal species

Small mammals such as the Cape hare, Indian crested porcupine, Honey badger, and Desert hedgehog pose no significant danger to humans and also occupy important and unique niches within the ecosystem.

Effects of Intentional Eradication Efforts

Many of eradication effort have suffered from a lack of understanding of species dynamics and are both economically impractical and ecologically unjustified. In some cases, these programs have lead to outright extinction of species and in other cases have lead to unforeseen consequences such as the death of non-target species (for example, when poisons are used to eradicate jackals, other species may be affected as well, such as the critically endangered Egyptian Vulture).

Eradication efforts of wild species that are targeted due to recent influenza epidemics/pandemics (H5N1/bird flu and H1N1/swine virus) are not helpful. In the case of swine flu there is no evidence that the current flu strain is carried in wild boar species. And if, for example, the H1NI virus was circulating in boar populations then culling might actually make things worse by causing individuals to disperse and because of increased human/pig interaction as a result of the effort.

Nature Iraq supports the protection and good stewardship of the prime habitat that is still available in Iraq for many of these species. None of Iraq's wildlife can be preserved without preserving the limited quality habitat available, to include both permanent and seasonal wetlands, woodlands, desert scrub, forest or agricultural groves, or other habitats. Habitat

restoration and preservation is a primary mission of this organization, and critical to its success.

Feral species

Feral animals are a severe problem in many areas of Iraq, particularly near urban areas. Feral animals are far more likely to carry rabies than wildlife, take a severe toll on native species, and are more likely to approach humans. Nature Iraq supports the control of feral populations as important for the health of both humans and the environment. Methods of control vary in terms of effectiveness and resources required, and often control of feral populations requires either significant commitment of resources or creative solutions tailored to specific populations. Nature Iraq at this time does not endorse any particular program of feral animal control as better than any other, although the organization urges that any control program treat all animals humanely and with respect.

Nuisance animals

Nuisance animals are specific, individual native animals that exhibit behavior detrimental or dangerous to human activity. Examples may include an animal found in a work or living area, one that habitually gets into trash or causes other damage, or an animal that appears aggressive without provocation or is unhealthy. Nature Iraq supports the management of nuisance animals, but recognizes that often the underlying problem is with human behavior and not animal behavior. Prevention is the best and most cost effective means of nuisance animal control. Some examples of preventative measures include animal proof trash containers, providing habitat corridors along known movement routes or between areas of key habitat, keeping hoses and cables off the ground and above the reach of hares or canine pups, or well maintained fencing. When more proactive measures are required, these measures should be humane and targeted. Nature Iraq opposes non-discriminate trapping, poisoning, or any non-humane method of nuisance animal control. Management of nuisance animals should use the best available science-based practices.

Nature Iraq specifically endorses the protection of native mammals during the den season from late winter to mid-summer, when mammals are likely to be nursing and raising young. It is particularly damaging to wild populations and also particularly inhumane to destroy adult animals during this period. It condemns the young to death by starvation or exposure and can quickly destroy an area's entire population of a species.

All of Iraq's native species play an important role in the environment. Some of these roles are important to the health of humans. Elimination of any of these species from the environment could cause lasting disruptions and degradation to the ecosystems of Iraq that have co-evolved over thousands of years. The critical rule for wildlife management in Iraq can be found in the writings of the ecologist Aldo Leopold, who stated that, "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering." Nature Iraq supports this conservative approach until such time that scientific data is available to formulate intelligent management programs. Until this time, the guiding principle of wildlife management in Iraq should be the medical maxim, "First, do no harm."