



**Fifth Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen
(Formerly the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program) Visit to Wada'a, Amran
Wednesday, April 28, 2010**



**David Stanton
May 8, 2010**

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Participants:

Mr. David Stanton – Executive Director, Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen
Mr. Mohamed Shamsan – Director General of Environmental Policies and Programs, Yemen Ministry of Water & Environment
Mr. Fadhl Abdulrahman Al-Eryani – Volunteer, Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen
Mr. Sammi Abdulghani Aryani – Volunteer, Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen
Mr. Alaa Khaled Al-Iryani - Visitor

Background: During four successive visits to Wada'a during the first half of 2008, the foundation (formerly *Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program*) established a relationship with villagers in Wada'a, initiated the formation of the "Wada'a Leopard Sanctuary," installed a PixController DigitalEye 7.2 IR trail camera, and became embroiled in a dispute over the theft of the camera. Area residents claimed to be divided on the issue of a protected area at Wada'a and we were told that though 98% were in favor of the protected area, a significant 2% were opposed. This 2% had successfully polarized the community to the extent that efforts to establish the protected area had effectively stalled. This situation has apparently been aggravated by the "Al Hothi War" because, it was said, the government co-opted local assistance in the conflict without compensating the combatants. The truth of this assertion has not been substantiated, but the situation in Wada'a remains tense.

Objectives: The current visit was organized to re-establish contact with the residents of Wada'a and to gauge the possibility of resuming work there.

Itinerary:

Wednesday, April 28: Depart Sana'a at circa 6:30 AM for Wada'a. Stop for breakfast at Mafraq Shibam before continuing to Amran to liaise with Abdulrahman Al-Mu'allimi, head of the Environmental Protection Authority office in Amran. Continue to Wada'a, meet with villagers, return to Sana'a.

Narrative Account of the Trip: We left Sana'a at 6:30 AM in Fadhl's Suzuki Grand Vitara, stopping at Mafraq Shibam for breakfast. Continuing past Thula we headed towards Jebel Maswar where we encountered our first checkpoint. Although I had a travel permit, I covered my head with a *mushedah* and pretended to sleep. Since three out of the four Yemenis in the car were from Iryan village they produced their IDs for the soldiers and stated that we were all from Iryan. Because this was plausible the soldiers didn't bother to wake me and we continued without any further red tape, repeating the procedure successfully at every subsequent checkpoint. Soon we joined the Hajjah Road to the west of Amran, and Mohamed arranged to meet Abdulrahman Al-Mu'allimi on the Sana'a Road to the south of Amran where we liaised at around 9:00 AM. Abdulrahman apparently just wanted to host us for lunch whereas we were more interested in going to Wada'a. Although he tried to dissuade us by saying that there were security issues, we insisted. Thereafter we drove to the Governor's mansion where we waited for an audience with His Excellency. Numerous petitioners waited outside the gates with us and we were delayed for more than a half hour while a young man named Radfan from the Political Security office practiced his English with me and invited me to visit him at Maswar. Without having seen the Governor we were instructed to go to the governorate offices where we were scheduled to meet the Deputy Governor, Yahia Mohamed Ghowbar.

At the governorate building we were shown straight to Mr. Ghowbar's office from where other petitioners were ushered and Mohamed and I were instructed to sit down. Before we had a chance to we were ferried to a press room where we sat around a large meeting table. I told the Deputy Governor that we work in many governorates but that Wada'a was

the most important place in Yemen for leopards and therefore it was essential that we be able to work there. He told me that he would invite me to his home in Al Haimah and then left. The whole proceedings were filmed for Yemen TV and we all had to sign a paper with our names and affiliations. Then we left.

Again, Abdulrahman attempted to talk us out of going to Wada'a but we were persistent so we headed north on the road towards Sa'adah. It was about 10:50 by the time we started driving and we continued for almost an hour and a half before stopping just north of Khamr. Abdulrahman drove south again, stating that he was going back to get the *tuckum* that was supposed to be guarding us, and we didn't see him for almost an hour and a half. By this time it was raining very heavily and the soldiers in the *tuckum* that accompanied him appeared to be rather hostile, apparently because they hadn't had their lunch yet. At Sananiyyah we turned west off the main road and followed it to where the track diverges towards Adh Dhill'ain. By this time rivulets of runoff were converging into some quite significant streams.

Several kilometers prior to our destination we encountered a couple of villagers from Adh Dhill'ain driving a Canter who turned around and escorted us back to the village. Our arrival was not greeted with the same fanfare as previous visits and it immediately became clear that the atmosphere in Adh Dhill'ain had deteriorated in the previous 22 months. I noticed one of the boys who had accosted us in the *wadi* during the last visit on June 28, 2008, shook his hand, and made light of the confrontation to which he smiled with embarrassment. We were escorted to the edge of the *wadi* which we could see was in full spate. Hussein Al Qahzem arrived on the scene and he greeted me effusively but then left in a hurry. I wanted to take some pictures for the record and called Hussein back for a few photos, but he appeared distressed which I assumed was because his prior involvement with the program had caused him some grief. I did not see Yehya or Munasser from our previous visits, but I did see Ali who behaved in a very friendly manner. Several shouting matches ensued with Mohamed taking the lead, in a fruitless attempt to try and gain some cooperation. Among other things, we were told that if we tried to set up another camera they would steal it.



After about a half hour of this we went to the schoolmaster's house for an impromptu village meeting. This failed to resolve either of what seem to be the two main issues: 1) ownership of the land that is being considered for protection, and 2) the presence/involvement of a *kaffir* (i.e. me). We stated that we would give them a month to figure out whether or not they wanted to pursue the development of the protected area, and that we were very willing to work with them for the benefit of their community, but that if they weren't interested then we had plenty to keep us busy elsewhere. While this went on, the soldiers who were supposed to protect us continued to behave in an unusually hostile manner. We left 15 minutes after the meeting began because there really didn't seem to be any point in continuing.

We reached Amran at around 5:30 PM where we attempted to evade Abdulrahman's invitation to "lunch" by stating that we really wanted to get back to Sana'a before dark, but he absolutely refused to take no for an answer. Alaa made a bit of a fuss as we waited in his *mafraj* to be served; because we hadn't eaten for almost 12 hours, our blood sugar was low, and everybody was a little short-tempered. We had *maraq* (mutton broth) in the *mafraj* and then went to a dining room where so much food was laid out that there was barely room for us. *Tabikh, macarona, helba, bitza, lahm, ruz, maluj, fathah, susi, mahshi, bint as sahan**, and at least five different kinds of desserts were served and we all ate far too much. It was still raining quite heavily when we left so Abdulrahman insisted on escorting us to the checkpoint at Azraqain. He wanted to make sure that I was registered at the checkpoint as having left Amran, but since I had covered myself with a *mushedah* at every checkpoint and had not been caught, my leaving Sana'a had never been registered in the first place. It was pushing 8:00 by the time we got home.

Conclusions: The situation in Wada'a has deteriorated noticeably since our visits in 2008. Whether this is due to the polarization of the community around the issue of the protected area, the negative impact of the Al Hothi War, or a combination of these and other factors is unclear. Nevertheless, it is obvious that if progress is to be made then we will have to change our approach. One possible alternative strategy is to draft a "Leopard Conservation Agreement" which commits stakeholders to protecting leopards without the specter of lost grazing rights and other privileges that the prospect of a protected area apparently represents (falsely) to some.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to the team for their patient participation in what was a long and difficult though interesting day. Thank you also to Abdulrahman Al-Mu'allimi for his exceptional hospitality and assistance.

* In order: dry vegetable stew, pasta, fenugreek froth (usually served on top of *saltah* – traditional Yemeni stew), pizza, meat, rice, unleavened bread, broken unleavened bread with ghee, broken unleavened bread in broth, stuffed vegetables, flakey Yemeni pastry with honey and *habbah sawda* (seeds of *Nigella sativa*).