



**Fourth Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program Visit to Wada'a, Amran**  
**Saturday, June 28, 2008**



**David Stanton**  
**(from memory)**  
**April 21, 2010**

## Fourth Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program Visit to Wada'a, Amran

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### Participants:

Mr. David Stanton – Coordinator, Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program

Mr. Yousuf Mohageb – Owner, Arabian Ecotours

Mr. Ben Saali – Education consultant, Millennium Relief and Development Services

**Background:** Following a research visit to Wada'a by a team from the IUCN Cat Specialist Group in December, 2007 the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program made three visits to Wada'a in the first six months of 2008. During the final visit on Thursday, June 5 we installed a PixController DigitalEye 7.2 IR trail camera in order to document the presence of Arabian leopards in Wadi Lefaj al Yamani.

**Objectives:** The current visit was specifically organized to check for images on the trail camera that we had installed on the previous visit.

### Itinerary:

**Saturday, June 28:** Depart Sana'a at circa 6:00 AM for Wada'a. Stop for breakfast at Al Raydah before continuing to Adh Dhil'ain. Check the trail camera, and return to Sana'a.

**Narrative Account of the Trip:** We left Sana'a in the early morning in Yousuf's Toyota Land Cruiser Prado, stopping for breakfast before continuing north of Khamr. When we picked up Hussein Al-Qahzem at Sananiyyah Village he instructed us to drive to Khowbah instead of Adh Dhil'ain "because it was an easier walk to the *wadi*." Although this struck me as being somewhat odd (If it was easier to walk from Khowbah, why didn't we always start from there?) we followed his instructions and parked at as low an elevation in the village as we were able to. A local man insisted that we stop at his house for a meal, but we had a lot to accomplish in a limited amount of time so we declined his offer and descended into the *wadi*. I heard three gunshots and asked Hussein, why, when the sheikh had told us during our first visit that nobody ever fires their guns near the wadi for fear of scaring the leopards, did I always hear gunshots when we were in Wada'a? Hussein said, "Oh, that's just a wedding." In fact it was obviously not a wedding, but I let it drop.

After walking for a few more minutes we heard children shouting, but I just assumed that it was boys at play and thought nothing more of it. Before long we were walking up the *wadi* bed towards where we had installed the camera three and a half weeks previously. After a few minutes we encountered a skirmish line of approximately ten armed boys ranging in age from 12 to 20 blocking the *wadi* and proclaiming that we could not proceed any further. Hussein argued with them and we pressed on up the *wadi*, but the boys became more agitated and intense and we were forced to stop and have a discussion. We could see armed men higher up the cliffs and at least two shots were fired from above in order to intimidate us, but Hussein kept on pressing his point and we retreated into the shade of some trees to continue the argument. At one point things got really very heated, people released their safeties and everyone spread out in order to be in a better position should anyone commence firing. Ben, Yousuf, and I tried to find some cover and each of us huddled as close as we could get to a boulder of our own choosing, but although there were numerous boulders in the *wadi*, we were surrounded and if anybody really wanted to shoot us it would have been very easy. At this stage, Yousuf's instincts as a leader in the tourism industry induced him to say, "Safety first," and he suggested that we abort the mission. Things cooled down though, and we were soon joined by reinforcements from "our side." Yehia, Ali, and a number of other armed men from Adh Dhil'ain had run down the trail into the wadi and with their added presence the balance of power shifted in our favor so we continued up *wadi* towards where we had previously set up the trail camera.

When we arrived we were not surprised to discover that the camera had been stolen. I gave a brief speech in my limited Arabic stating that if the people of Wada'a didn't want us to work towards developing a protected area in their region that there were many other locations in Yemen where our efforts would be welcomed and appreciated. Yousuf then delivered a moving and heartfelt speech chastising the culprits for their shortsightedness, the shame that they had brought on the entire community, and the missed opportunity caused by the theft of the camera. The initial response to

Yousuf's speech was genuinely remorseful, but this quickly dissolved into a show of false bravado and the entire child army disappeared noisily up the trail towards Adh Dhil'ain, laughing theatrically as if nothing mattered.

Hussein estimated from the state of the concrete that it had set for approximately two weeks after we had installed it, which means that the camera had been stolen the week before. Whether or not this was accurate, the outcome is the same. As there was nothing else we could do, we started back down the *wadi* from whence we came and hiked up to Khowbah. On the way we stopped to look at two *margabahs* that we had not previously seen. These were the second and third *margabahs* that I have seen in Wada'a, but according to Dr. David Mallon of the IUCN cat specialist group, there are at least five in the area. One of the *margabahs* smelled of greasy bones indicating that perhaps it had been used more recently than the three years that our informants claimed had passed since they had last trapped a leopard.

Back in Khowbah we were feasted at an impromptu meeting of the village elders who stated that 98% of the people in Wada'a were in favor of the protected area, but that two families in Adh Dhil'ain were opposed to it and stirring up opposition. The basic issue seems to be a misunderstanding of the concept of what a protected area is. While we are working towards the establishment of an area where wildlife can live unmolested and which promises to bring some employment and tourist revenue to the area, some people believe that they will be excluded from the area and thereby lose their traditional grazing, water, and wood harvesting rights. We were told to leave things in their hands and that they would solve the mystery and get the camera back. It was clear that these men had felt shamed by the whole incident and we parted company on positive terms. It was well after dark by the time we left and it was approaching 10:00 PM by the time that we finally got back to Sana'a.

**Conclusions:** One mustn't let enthusiasm interfere with good judgment. It should be possible to deploy a trail camera in Wada'a without stirring up conflict. However, it is clear that there is much work that needs to be done before we can successfully undertake this kind of research there.

**Epilogue:** Almost two years after the fact, we still don't have the camera back and it is probable that we will never get it. Subsequent efforts to visit the community were not successful. I attempted to bring the Bab al Mandab\* group to Wada'a on October 22 – 23, 2008 and had negotiated for our needs to be met by local suppliers in the hopes of demonstrating the potential of injecting some money into the local economy by hosting tourists. However, at the Sabaha checkpoint on the Hodeidah Road we waited for more than an hour while the Minister of the Interior and other high-ranking Yemen government officials decided that it would be imprudent for us to visit Wada'a on the basis of rumors/intelligence that somebody there was planning to harm us. We therefore went to Manakha instead.

On November 30, 2008 we planned a day trip to Wada'a as part of Sana'a International School's Yemen Week celebrations but again, were turned away, this time by Sheikh Mohamed who stated that it would be unwise for us to visit just then. Since this time, we have been informed that tribal difficulties stemming from tensions relating to the Al Hothi War have kept the area unstable although at the time of writing (April 21, 2010) it appears that things are quieting down.

**Acknowledgements:** Thank you to Yousuf Mohageb and Ben Saeli for their stalwart companionship during a trying encounter. Thank you also to Hussein Al-Qahzem and his confederates for keeping level heads and safely guiding us past the "*hizbawalad*."

\*"Bab al Mandab" is an annual trip that I organize for students at Sana'a International School. It involves a ten-day trip through various parts of Yemen culminating in a three-day camping trip at Bab al Mandab to watch/monitor the mass raptor migration across the straights to Djibouti.

#### **Appendix I: Ben Saeli's account from a letter to his parents written the day after the confrontation.**

"Had a classic Yemeni adventure yesterday - typical rugged wadi, typical flash thunderstorm that sent us scrambling for the safety of a dry rock overhang, typical cross cultural misunderstanding, typical tribal quarrels, typical way of dealing with conflict by shoving, yelling, cocking AK-47's and firing warning shots, typical resolution by older wiser local leaders.

I videoed some of the tense moments from the shade of a tree and then ran down-wadi to hide behind a big rock when gun actions started crunching rounds into barrels and safeties started clicking off as people scrambled out of the wadi and took up firing positions behind rocks. Our concern came from the fact that the gang leader was all of 22 yrs old and his gang of ten with AK-47's were 10-18 year olds who were being extra red-faced and aggressive to show that they were brave men who wouldn't let the neighboring village (who's guests we were) turn their wadi into a "protected area". As our village elder elbowed them out of the way and pushed on up the wadi (and we followed suit behind him), they got angrier and angrier at being disregarded, and their reinforcements fired a few warning shots from the rim of the canyon. If an older leader from their village had come down into the wadi, even with 50 armed guys with him, we would have been confident that things would be resolved peacefully between him and the old man from our village who was guiding us, and that the guns would only be a show of authority. But the teenagers were all worked up and couldn't be reasoned with for quite a while, and there was no one older to reason with. They were probably jealous that our village was hosting the foreigners and leading the negotiations with the Ministry of Environment, and ashamed that the camera had been stolen and didn't want us to discover it's theft, and they assumed that "protected area" meant walls and gun towers, while the foreigners simply meant an unspoiled wilderness where hunting and trapping would be forbidden in order to encourage lucrative ecotourism to see Arabian Leopards. Language fluency and cultural understanding are crucial keys in those kind of complex situations, and fortunately we had an older, level-headed ecotourism leader from Sanaa who helped calm things down and mediate and explain things to the hotheads.

As we were discussing things with our village guides afterward, we called it a "designated virgin wilderness area" instead of a "protected area". In tribal Yemeni minds, the word "protected area" means an area that is covered by firepower from reinforced gunnery positions. But the words "virgin" and "wilderness" communicate just that - unspoiled, untouched. Our ecotourism guide friend explained to them that just like Yemeni families fiercely protect their virgin girls, and grooms insist on finding a girl who they are absolutely positive is a virgin, so the foreigners treasure virgin wilderness areas and go to great lengths to protect them and travel from far and wide to enjoy them. It was neat to see the lights go on in their heads, both for their own understanding and for their ability to explain the concept to the rest of the villages which surround the beautiful wadi.

By the time we got back to Sanaa last evening, delegations had already arrived from the village to the regional Sheiks who were here in Sanaa, and police had been sent to arrest the gang that confronted us and recover the trail camera which they had presumably stolen a week before. Ahh, Yemen."