

CAPTIVE LEOPARDS AND LIONS IN YEMEN NEED HELP

BY LUCY VIGNE AND ESMOND MARTIN

Yemen, on the south-western Arabian peninsula, is an arid, largely mountainous country, and until the end of the revolution in 1970 this feudal state was probably the most backward and isolated in the world. Wealth from Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s allowed many people to own cars and buy televisions, and the country opened up to foreign investment and new ideas. The general attitude towards wild animals, however, has been harsh and remains so still today, with a preference for killing or capturing rather than protecting animals.

This behaviour is clearly demonstrated by some lions which are cruelly treated and kept in a row of small concrete cages with thick metal bars beside the Salah Palace in Taiz. The Palace is now a museum, and the lions attract about 100 foreign tourists and Yemenis a day, who pay only 20 rials (16 US cents) to enter the compound. Taiz, a large city in central Yemen, was the former home to the last ruler of North Yemen, Imam Ahmed. During his reign (1948-1962), Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia made a gift to the Imam of some lions, whose progeny - five males and four females - still survive in their cramped cages. The lions are mocked and taunted by their keepers, who hit their paws and pull their whiskers (the cages are too small for the lions to retreat from the bars). The lions try to retaliate by leaping and roaring at the bars, while the fascinated spectators stare avidly or take photos. The foreign tourists watch this medieval scene with horror, but rarely comment. Also on view are a few animals captured from the mountains around Taiz. There is a solitary caracal in a box-sized cage, three mangey striped hyenas, and a sexually frustrated male baboon who walks in tight circles in a stereotype fashion while attempting to mount a metal bar which crosses his path; two seemingly lifeless female baboons sit in the corners of the small cage.

Some other Yemeni wild animals are kept in tiny enclosures elsewhere to amuse the public, such as at the handful of Lebanese restaurants. In 1997 one such restaurant in Sanaa had in cages two desert foxes, a porcupine and a vulture, while a baby baboon was tied to a chain. At the same time, in Taiz, another restaurant displayed beside the diners, through a glass partition, three eagles which would stare constantly at the sky through a thick wire mesh a foot above their bobbing heads. Although restaurant animals have quite a good diet of left-overs, some animals adapt less well to caged life and noisy, gesticulating spectators, and the turnover of animals is consequently fairly high.

Yemenis are running out of large mammals to keep in captivity. Most have been shot for trophies or for shooting practice, especially gazelles. As a result, the main food sources for the Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) have been depleted, especially dorcas gazelles, and the



Yemenis enjoy watching caged lions kept in small concrete cages at the Salah Palace in Taiz. (Photo: Lucy Vigne)



Caged hyenas beside Sanaa's central cinema are poked with a big stick to make them react. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

leopard itself is now thus very rare. The Leopard Group of Arabia has been formed among interested individuals from the species' range: Saudi Arabia, Oman, the Emirates and Yemen. Members of the Group agree that the largest surviving number of leopards exists in Yemen's rugged mountains, well over half the total population. As there are thought to be only 100 to 200 left, they have stated that it is vital to survey and protect them.

A remote gorge called Al Wadi-A about 120 km north of Sanaa is still an important leopard area. The leopards are considered a pest, however, as they have had to turn to livestock predation due to lack of gazelles. The farmers lose three to four goats a month to leopards, and one leopard has been known to kill 45 goats in a single attack. The farmers have trapped and killed about 100 leopards in the last 20 years. Leopards are shy and nocturnal and rarely seen, so a stone crypt is built which matches the surrounding rocky countryside. Some goat meat is attached to a rope hanging from a boulder at the entrance. When the leopard tries to take the meat, the rope pulls down the rocks balanced on top, trapping the leopard inside. A small hole exists through which to shoot the leopard. According to the farmers, in the last five or six years, they have caught 10 to 15 leopards, of which they have killed seven in traps. The farmers do not have the resources to keep a leopard alive; instead they use only the fat to help rheumatism and the skin for skin diseases.

Farmers are discovering, however, that they can make more money by selling leopards alive instead. Several prominent Yemenis, including the President of Yemen, have leopards which they keep in cages at their homes. They are usually sold singly and kept in isolation, and thus do not have a chance to breed, which is very regrettable for such a rare species. They are usually also kept in miserable conditions. In the early 1990s a male cub of less than a year old followed his mother into one of the traps in Al Wadi-A. The mother was unmanageable and was shot dead, while the cub was kept for a year and a half in a tiny cage in a courtyard beside Sanaa's central cinema. The mother's severed head was attached to the top of a pole to attract audiences. In May 1995, the Arabian Leopard Trust (based in the Emirates) bought the leopard for \$2,700 to take him away from these appalling conditions. The young animal was flown to Sharjah with the hope of captive breeding.

Since mid-1995 a second male leopard from the same area has been kept beside Sanaa's cinema in a cage measuring about 1.5 m by 0.9 m and perhaps 0.75 m high. The animal hardly has space to stand. Next to it is a slightly larger cage holding three emaciated hyenas which hobble over the sharp barred floor, unable to exercise their atrophying limbs. The leopard and hyenas provide entertainment for cinema-goers who enter the enclosure, for 20 rials each, through a makeshift wall of rusty oil drums and corrugated iron sheets. These two cages can be seen behind a lower wall of empty oil drums, surrounded by rubbish. Those in charge climb over the wall and poke the leopard with a metal rod or with sticks; they bang the back of the metal cage and turn the cage virtually upside down to make the leopard react and hiss, as he tries to cower in the back, in order to amuse the Yemeni audience.

Something obviously needs to be done to stop this cruelty to captive wild animals in Yemen, and to protect the rare leopards. It is illegal to