



New-age Noah, naturalist Jack Rudloe, is preserving more than 350 different specimens of everything from sharks to starfish, in case the Gulf of Mexico oil spill threatens them with extinction. In his four-acre facility, Rudloe has created an environment that includes a grassland and duplicates high and low tides. Around 50,000 fiddler crabs say aye to that

Across the country, mere sighting of a leopard is seen as reason enough to capture or kill the animal. Research shows arbitrary capture and release is, in fact, causing and aggravating conflict

LET'S UNBELL THE CAT

Vidya Athreya

The recent incident last month in the Aravallis, near Gurgaon, where a leopard ate the pet dog of a farmhouse owner, typifies everything about the big cat. And the illegal capture and brouhaha that followed typifies everything about public attitude regarding the animal.

This much is clear: leopards commonly come to human habitations (in this case, even if a couple of kilometres from Gurgaon), their favourite prey is dogs (as amply highlighted in Jim Corbett's writings), they are not inclined to kill people, and, they are extremely adaptable (which is why they occur from the tree-line to dry forests and why their numbers have not dwindled despite hundreds being killed for illegal wildlife trade). That they are given to hanging around human settlements unobtrusively was illustrated here as well — although the mother was with two cubs and an adult, they drew little attention until she picked on a prized pet.

Our own reaction always is one of misplaced panic; people almost always equate any leopard with a man-eater, which, therefore must be put down or removed. Actually this reaction only worsens the otherwise harmless situation.

Our work in Maharashtra, where high densities of leopards (9 in 100 sqkm) live among population densities of more than 300 people per sqkm in rich irrigated cropland, shows that the cats are not at all inclined to attack people although they routinely visit houses to take dogs and goats. But as was the case in Gurgaon, even across the country, leopards are routinely picked up from where we do



TEXTBOOK CASE: The leopard captured in Gurgaon last month. The cat spent several hours in a cage, bruising itself against the bars, before being shifted

not want them and released in forested areas without any thought to the consequence of our actions.

We found such animals normally home back and can travel upto 50km in a week. One leopard, Ajoba, around five years old, walked 120km from the Malshej Ghats to Mumbai, crossing a railway line and the Mumbai-Agra highway and taking 25 days to make this long journey. He also went into the populated Vasai Industrial estate, and we knew this because of his GPS collar, but no attacks were reported though he fed on the stray dogs there.

Mumbai has forests at its northern edges, which are home to leopards. These are also the reservoirs of drinking water that Mumbai is dependent on and because of the mushrooming buildings around the forests, there is constant public pressure on the forest department to trap the animals even if only sighted. Earlier, each year, around 20 leopards used to be trapped, mostly around the edges of the

forests and released in the core areas of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. We saw, that around the same time, a large number of attacks on people was reported, mostly near release sites. Leopards let loose in unfamiliar territory try and home back and in their stressed, hungry state, probably go for the easiest prey in the crowded areas they pass — children. These attacks further the chain reaction, and more and more leopards are trapped as people panic and these are again released elsewhere, packed off to zoos or at worst, declared man-eaters and killed.

To end this meaningless spiral and check casualties, we have to make sure that these arbitrary captures and releases stop. If we leave leopards undisturbed, they continue to use a very small area — around 20sqkm — and are not inclined to cause harm to humans. In fact, a mother teaches her cubs for more than a year how to avoid people, how to hunt even if they are living in a human-dominated landscape. It is important that the mother is not taken away at this point. This lesson ought to have been learnt

from a recent episode in Corbett. Months after a tigress was killed by hunters, the inexperienced and untrained cub began frequenting villages for goats, endangering himself and attacking those who came in his way.

That is not to say that leopards can be welcomed in our midst. As those who share their living space with wildlife say, the best approach is maintaining respect and distance: ensuring that one keeps out of the animal's way.

How do we do that? Building high fences does not help, as these animals are extremely agile. Moreover, high walls may stop leopards from escaping when confronted by people and thus force them to attack in self-defence. We have to remember that leopards are as scared of us as we are of them. The first response of a leopard when it realizes that people are around is to hide and flee. It attacks in panic when it finds itself surrounded or cornered. The best way to deal with a chance encounter with a leopard is to allow the animal a little space and time.

Of course, nothing like it if one can avoid a chance encounter in the first place. The trick is to ensure that one does not surprise a leopard. For example, if one is going out in the night, one should announce one's presence by talking or singing loudly.

A few other simple measures also help. As evident in the Gurgaon case, stray dogs are an invite to the leopard. Dogs, goats and calves must be driven into secure enclosures well before nightfall. Ideally, enclosures must be some distance from homes, as leopards will venture close and will stop visiting only when they realize no food is available. If meat is to be disposed of, especially from kitchens that feed many, it must be covered adequately and thrown far away from the home.

A little mutual respect and common sense will go a long way to reduce conflict and save lives on both sides.

The writer is a wildlife biologist and heads Project Waghoba, a research effort to study the man-animal conflict situation in Maharashtra

AJOBA'S LONG JOURNEY

- Ajoba, a leopard around five years old, was **rescued from a well near the Pune-Nashik highway last year and fitted with a tracking device**. His collar had a GPS and a mobile communication system

Readings of the leopard's position were stored in the collar and **transmitted via SMS to the server** whenever the animal reached an area that had mobile connectivity

- Through this system, it was found that he travelled around **120km in 25 days, from the foothills of the Malshej Ghats to the Sanjay Gandhi National Park** in Mumbai's Borivli

- Ajoba crossed the Malshej Ghats, Ajoba Peak, Ratangad, **Kasara railway station, Tansa**



wildlife sanctuary, Wada, Tungreshwar wildlife sanctuary, **Vasai and Sanjay Gandhi National Park**

- Throughout this journey, **no attacks were reported**, though Ajoba lingered around human settlements, even townships

- This is the **first time in Maharashtra that researchers have been able to track a leopard's movements**. The collar malfunctioned after Ajoba swam across the Vasai creek, spotted last at SGNP