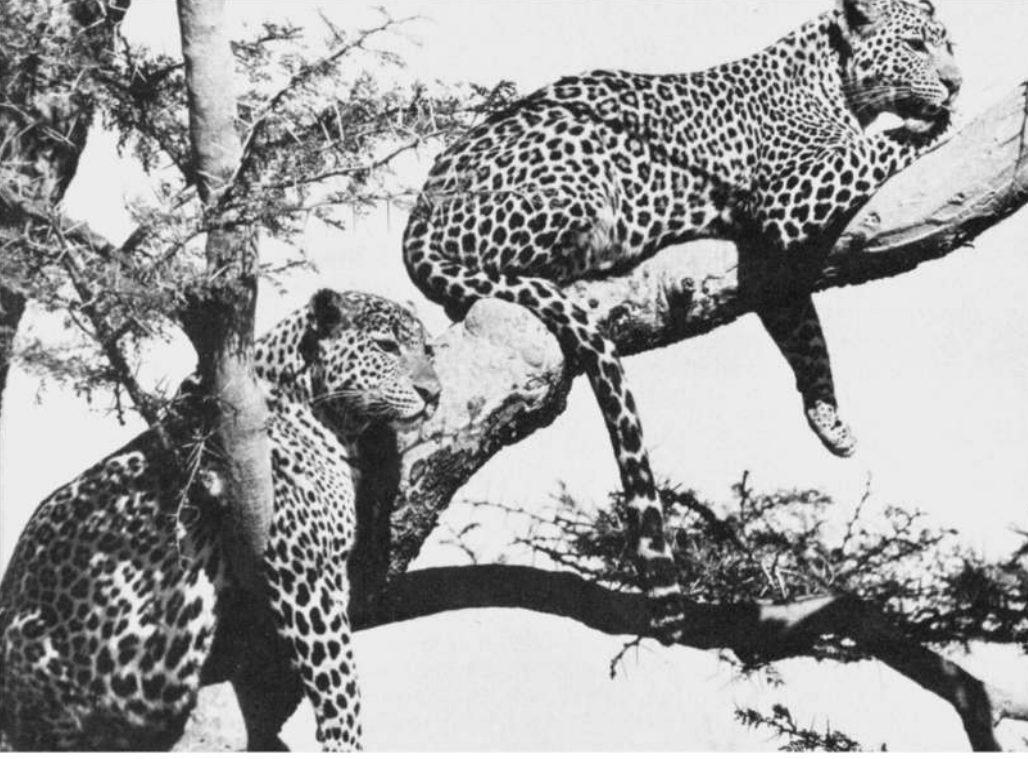

Leopard and Cheetah in Ethiopia

Norman Myers

Leopards still occur in considerable numbers in Ethiopia, but cheetahs, though widespread, are not numerous and are still declining, according to this report of the author's survey of their status, made in January–February 1973 for IUCN. And the pressures on both species are too great to allow even present numbers to be maintained. The trade in skins flourishes, despite protection, and villagers and city merchants alike boast of their ability to supply skins at any time, often in considerable quantities. More leopard skins are being sold in 1973 than ever before, and the supply cannot keep up with the demand—despite the moratorium recommended by the International Fur Trade Federation.

Ethiopia has long been renowned as one of the main centres in Africa for the distribution of leopard and cheetah skins on to world markets. These skins have reputedly come not only from Ethiopia itself, but from Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and even more distant countries, and a large proportion are thought to have been illegally taken.

Ethiopia is a large and varied country. Of its almost 500,000 square miles, twice the size of Texas or about the size of the present European Economic Community, two-fifths is lowland savanna or

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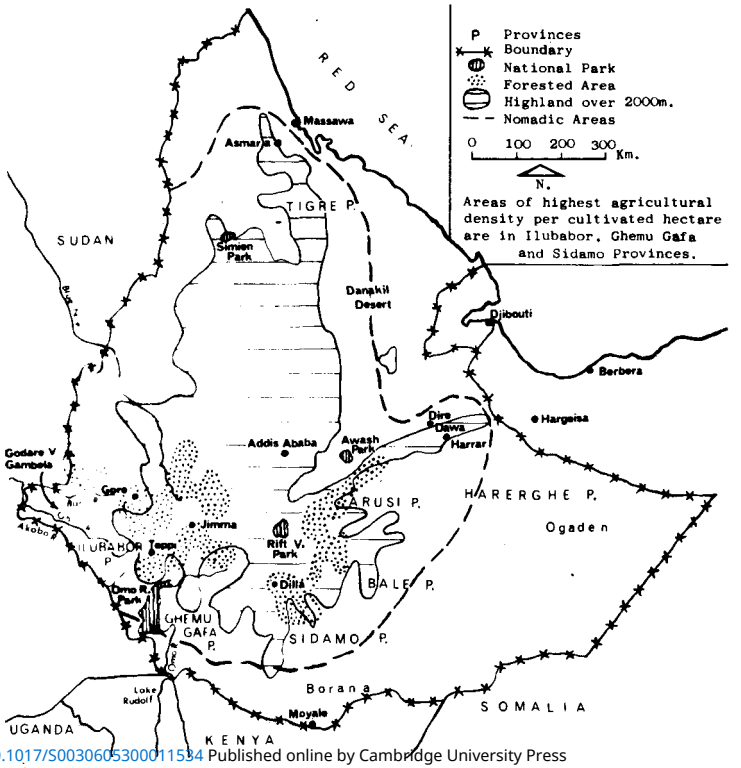
semi-desert. The 27 million people (growth rate 2.5 per cent; young population, almost 10 per cent urban) are mostly concentrated in the highlands. The population implosion combined with extensive malaria control, has brought a spread of cultivators into the low country where there is often sufficient rainfall for semi-intensive agriculture. Much of Ethiopia's wildlife lives in the lowlands, for example in the Danakil Depression in the north-east, in the Ogaden in the east, and in a lowland strip along the southern border. These huge tracts of land, around 200,000 square miles, could have contained enormous numbers of wildlife in times gone by.

Until recent years there was only moderate habitat disruption by pastoralists, and in some areas, notably in the south-west around Lake Rudolf and the Omo River, there are still fair numbers of game surviving. But in both highland and lowland areas of Ethiopia there is now gross environmental deterioration. The *Atlas of Ethiopia* (Mariam, 1970) estimates that over 52 per cent of the country, mostly in the highlands, loses around 3000 tons of soil per square mile each year. In many parts of the lowlands there has been overgrazing for decades. A majority of the country's 26 million cattle, 24 million sheep and goats, and 8 million horses, mules and donkeys, and camels, are to be found in the pastoralist areas, and these livestock numbers are increasing faster than the human population. On top of this overtaxing of the grassland areas, there is now widespread tree cutting, leading to sheet erosion and general degradation of the biota, with decreasing grasslands and spreading bush growth, making for a less favourable habitat for many wild herbivores and their attendant predators, especially gazelles and



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cheetah. Ten years ago, in Borana, in the south, both were common; today gazelles have virtually disappeared and cheetah have been seen only very rarely in the past five years.

Forests

Forest covers 7.2 per cent of the country, over 5000 square miles of which are in the south-west. This part of Ethiopia must contain some of the finest patches of primeval forest still to be found in Africa; they make excellent leopard habitat. But in the western and south-western highlands, there are at least two, and in half the region over four, persons per cultivated acre. Hence, there is great pressure to disperse into the forest reserves. Year by year, the spread of cultivation extends deeper into the forest, notably in the Gore-Bongo area of Illubabor Province. Indiscriminate destruction of virgin forest is aggravated by cultivation on over-steep slopes. In addition, there is forest exploitation along the Gongo and Ganji Valleys, pushing steadily westwards from Teppi and the head of the Ghilo River towards the Godare Valley. The projected Teppi-Godare road could well open up immense tracts which are at present pretty inaccessible. Between Godare and Ghilo there is still a tremendous expanse of unbroken forest-savanna, stretching away north to the Baro River and south to the Akobo River, but it is deteriorating rapidly, and could be ruined within five years. North of the Baro River, in more accessible country due to the dry conditions year-round, the natural biota and the wildlife have been almost completely destroyed since 1967.

There is still plenty of untouched forest and vast stretches of savanna in the Godare Valley and to the north-west, extending into the open plains towards the Pibor River and the Sudan border. But even this remote part of Ethiopia has not been safe from intermittent destruction. No wildlife personnel operate in the Gambella area; a Reserve was approved in 1966, but has still not been gazetted. During the Sudan civil war, thousands of Nuer pastoralists established permanent cattle camps on the Ethiopian side of the border and as far east as the Birhani Salam police post. The Nilotic Nuer, unlike the Hamitic Danakil, are great hunters, and have been killing the wildlife at an accelerating rate with the arrival during the civil war of firearms and ammunition aplenty. Anuak tribesmen have established scattered villages over most of the rest of this area in the western parts of the province. They are cultivators, establishing villages along the major watercourses. They have no livestock, and hence are a meat-hungry people. They are the principal hunters in the province, and have used their sophisticated weapons to inflict a sharp increase in the rate of wildlife destruction in the past two or three years. They send their spotted cat skins to the outside world via Teppi, Bonga and Misantefari, to Jimma and Addis Ababa. A reliable report from Jilu and Adura suggests that in some areas wildlife populations may have been cut in half in only the past two years.

Some observers suggest that the sudden increase of supplies of spotted cat skins in the early 1960s may have coincided with the

intensification of the Sudan civil war, when guerillas may have been looking for foreign exchange with which to purchase weapons. (A similar phenomenon may be occurring in other disturbed parts of Africa at the present time, using rhino horn and elephant ivory as well.) Following the end of the Sudan civil war, there are now thousands of tribesmen with no immediate crisis to occupy them who have the wherewithal to upgrade their subsistence living by slaughtering wildlife. Many of the Anyanya Freedom Fighters from the Sudan are now moving back over the border, leaving firearms in Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian police and military are reported to be involved. Tribesmen in the Omo area are said to be paid for their game trophies with rifles. Finally land in the western parts of the province is being offered for mechanised farming at ridiculously low prices.

Leopard Populations

In the remaining blocks of forest, there are unusual numbers of wildlife. As well as giant forest hogs, bushpig, bushbuck, duiker and buffalo, there are huge totals of monkeys: blue, de Brazza's, vervet and colobus, and olive baboon. In the 3500 square miles of forest, Brown and Urban (1970) estimated that there could be 20 colobus to a square mile, possibly as many as 70, in some parts, suggesting a total of 60,000–200,000 in the south-western forests (and in Ethiopia as a whole perhaps half a million, since colobus are also very common in the forests of Bale and Sidamo Provinces).* In fact, monkeys constitute the major herbivore biomass in the forest. There are no large carnivores such as lion, nor any spotted hyena, so common elsewhere in Ethiopia. This leaves little competition for the leopard, which is the only predator able to prey on both arboreal monkeys and terrestrial herbivores. According to Brown and Urban, leopards are still frequent in all habitats; plenty of fresh droppings and scratch marks are to be seen on all trails. There may even be a leopard density here to match that of other rain forest and montane forest areas in eastern Africa, as high as one to a square mile or more.

Leopard are also to be found widely in other parts of Ethiopia, though in depressed numbers as compared with former years. A long-experienced observer believes there are still leopard to be found in the mountainous areas of several provinces, including Arusi, Bale, Tigre, the Borana part of Sidamo, Ghemu Gafa, the Harrar and other parts of Harerghe, and in the Rift Valley. The main populations, however, seem to be concentrated in the forests of west and south-west Ethiopia. Of these, considerable numbers remain—otherwise there would have been no way of sustaining the high offtakes of the last decade. How far the current yield represents an increasing proportion of declining populations, is difficult to say. But the prospects for the future must be that the forest habitats are to undergo steady, and possibly accelerating, reduction. All the more reason, then, to protect the existing resource.

* But see Colobus Monkeys and the Tourist Trade, *Oryx*, May 1973, page 113. *Editor*

Little is known about leopard productivity, but an adult pair may well produce two cubs a year surviving to maturity. An idea of the pressure on the populations may be gained from the number of leopard skins from Ethiopia appearing on the United States market alone in the late 1960s: 1741 in 1968 and 1027 in 1969. In 1968 the Ethiopian government admitted to an official export *to all countries* of 312 skins, and in 1969 none. This discrepancy could illuminate the official figures given for September 1971—September 1972: 98 leopard skins exported to all countries of the world. All persons in the commercial trade whom I spoke to in Ethiopia, whether marketplace, merchant or poacher in the bush, agreed that more skins are being sold in 1973 than ever before—yet the supply is still unable to keep up with the demand. So much then for the three-year moratorium recommended by the International Fur Trade Federation, a proposal which seems to be ignored except in USA, UK and possibly West Germany. The position may change with the conclusion of the International Convention on Trade in Endangered Wildlife and Wildlife Products signed in Washington in March this year.

Cheetah Populations

According to reliable and experienced authorities in Ethiopia, cheetah also seem to be quite widespread still. They have been seen in recent times in the Somali border area of Harerghe Province, in Ghemu Gafa Province, and in the Borana area of Sidamo Province. There are reputed to be good numbers still in the Omo River area, and relict populations in the Ogaden and southern Bale Province, but far fewer than ten years ago; much the same story applies in the Danakil Depression. But one wildlife expert reports touring all these three extensive areas without seeing any. In fact, the cheetah is probably still present but decreasing in most of the dry lowlands. Part of the problem is that the prey populations are also showing a marked decline. In the Borana area, wild herbivores have decreased drastically in the past 10–15 years. The Borana race of Soemmering's gazelle, for example, was quite common up to about twelve years ago, but now is hard to find at all. Professional safari hunters could once guarantee a gazelle for their clients; now they report not having had one for the last six years.

The main stronghold for cheetah may now be the Danakil Depression and its national park. Although wildlife totals there have been thinned out in recent years, there are still impressive numbers of hartebeest, Grévy's zebra, oryx, gerenuk, Soemmering's gazelle, wild ass, warthog and ostrich. There are supposed to be plenty of lion and leopard, and some cheetah. Fortunately the area is completely uninhabited by nomads; in fact, it acts as a buffer zone between two opposed nomadic tribes, the Adol and the Isso. It can only be used as a wet-season grazing area; in the dry season, it is virtually waterless. But, like the Sardo Reserve in Wello Province, which once featured vast herds of Soemmering's and Speke's gazelles, oryx, ostrich, and wild ass, the Danakil is now being subjected to weekend 'sport hunters' from Dessie and Assad. The

Awash-Tendho Highway now under construction will exert a considerable influence on wildlife along its entire length, making the recently inaccessible region vulnerable to many of these sport hunters as well as bringing pastoralist settlements into the area.

Cheetah skins are not seen nearly so frequently in the markets of the big towns as are leopard skins. (By far the commonest skin displayed is serval, a trend found in other parts of Africa following tightening of the leopard and cheetah trade in some consumer countries). Nevertheless, I saw several hundred cheetah skins on sale in different parts of the country. The low-country hinterland around Djibouti is still being plundered for cheetah cubs which fetch a high price on the European market. This trade is no longer run by a well-known American so-called conservationist, as in the late 1960s, but depends from start to finish on a network of local tribesmen entrepreneurs. Capturing the cubs is not difficult; if one cannot get close enough to the mother to kill her, one merely pursues the family until the cubs fall behind.

If the current trade has been amounting to 100 live cheetah cubs delivered to Europe each year, and if one allows for mortality at various stages of the process, plus the skin trade, and if one considers the other attritive factors working against cheetah including savanna degradation, the cheetah cub trade could be exerting a depressive influence on cheetah populations over a broad spread of hinterland.

Trade Outlets

The network for bringing spotted cat skins to market seems to operate throughout Ethiopia; possibly as many are filtered out across the land frontiers as by air through Addis Ababa. A major exit is through the Dire-Dawa region to Djibouti, on the Red Sea. Skins go out on lorries carrying several tons of cattle hides, and Ethiopian customs officers are far less interested in goods going out of the country than those coming in.

At every centre where I checked during the course of 1600 miles of travel, I found people could supply skins either on the spot or after an interval of a few days. Although I did not visit all areas in the northern parts of the country, I learnt from several reliable sources at Asmara/Massawa that they dispose of a good number of skins both from Ethiopia and from Sudan. In small villages in southern and eastern Ethiopia, two or three leopard and/or cheetah skins would be available immediately. As in Addis Ababa and the larger towns, the skins did not show bullet holes or indeed any wounds of any sort. They all seem to be taken with leg traps, the steel instruments supplied in large numbers by Italy, though Brown and Urban (1970) report the use of deadfalls and rifle traps. Many skins showed bloodstains which had not yet turned black, indicating that they had been recently obtained. This suggests a regular turnover, as well as poor curing. Skins were more readily available in southern Ethiopia than in eastern areas, perhaps because villages in the Djibouti region find readier and speedier outlets. South of Dilla for 300 miles to the Kenya border, people said that skins are easier to

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obtain the further one travels from the large towns.

Not surprisingly, in this huge lowland tract of southern Ethiopia, the police appear to operate little if at all, and people make up their own administrative practices and regulations as they go along. At Moyale on the Kenya border I heard that 700 leopard skins (and 21,000 colobus skins) had gone south into Kenya in the previous eight months. Conversely, a trader at Moyale told me that during the past month he had imported from Kenya a total of 31 leopard skins (and 49 rhino horns), coming from Buna, Wajir and other parts of north-east Kenya. The administrative authorities and police in Kenya's Eastern Province seem to be more rigorous than in provinces of this region, although the trade in the entire region is difficult to regulate at all, given the protection it receives from senior personages in both countries.

In Addis Ababa I spoke to a man who runs a small stall in the Mercato, the extensive city market. He took me to his store at his home nearby, where he had over 100 leopard skins and 24 cheetah skins in stock. Some leopard skins were melanistic, some were Somali skins, some had much larger spots than others. All, he said, had been obtained in the last few months. He regularly despatches skins to France, Italy, and Scandinavia, though not as yet to Japan. He has even sent a few skins within the past few months in brown paper parcels bearing a false declaration to USA and UK. He said he would have no difficulty, in meeting a monthly order for 20 leopard and 20 cheetah skins for a single dealer; with advance notice

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he could go as high as 60 skins a month. He did not have export permits on hand, but he could get the necessary papers for any purchaser who insisted on documentation. The price of an undocumented leopard skin is E$1000 and an official one costs 1500 (US$500 and 750). A permit to possess and export a skin, whether leopard or cheetah, is E$125, and customs dues work out at E$50 to 75 depending on size and quality.

Beyond Regulation

A curio dealer in a shop on the main street within 200 yards of the Department of Wildlife Conservation told a similar story. He is described by the Department as one member of a co-operative of 16 fur dealers who have been told to run their affairs in one place where the Department can keep an eye on them. This is part of a registration campaign, of which more details below. The Department believes that this co-operative contains all the major dealers in Addis Ababa. The General Manager of the Department was surprised to hear of the man at the Mercato, but showed no inclination to do anything about him, describing the Mercato as being beyond regulation by any authority. The curio dealer showed me at least 100 leopard skins and about 40 cheetah skins, saying he had as many again in his store at home. Most skins looked recent, which argues not only a large turnover but a large supply stock in the wild even if it is in decline. Only one skin in ten looked as if it came from a sub-adult animal, which suggests there are no differential pressures on adults or sub-adults. Prices were similar to those cited at the Mercato, again with an emphatic distinction between officially available skins and those to be taken out undeclared at the bottom of a tourist suitcase.

The main source of leopard skins seems to be the south-western forests, and Bale Province in southern Ethiopia. Cheetah skins come from various parts of the lowlands, though especially from the Danakil. In southern localities I heard that skins are regularly supplied to traders by the police, the military, anti-malaria teams, survey teams, and road gangs. White people now travel out from Addis Ababa to go on weekend hunting trips, looking particularly for the more lucrative trophies. The journey to Awash Park, which once took ten hours, now takes only two, so it is an excellent place for a little genteel poaching. When the new highway to Kenya is completed, it will open up a swathe 50 miles wide through some of Ethiopia's best wildlife country.

Leopard may be hunted officially, cheetah not. The need to control the skin trade, and stop illegal traffic, is officially recognised to be 'so acute that it cannot be over-emphasised'. In theory, the street hawker, a bundle of skins over his shoulder, walking down the main thoroughfare of Addis Ababa within sight of the Department's windows, is operating outside the law. But apprehending the man could be a very complex affair, as anyone experienced in the intricacies of the Ethiopian governmental process will know. At present there is an attempt to register all skins in the possession of traders, whether legally obtained or not; two previous registration

attempts in the past eight years have proved abortive. The agreement inaugurated in Washington recently may change the whole picture; or it may not.

The new Head of the Department, Ato Teshome Ashine, has been in office only one year. Ethiopia is huge and funds are short. Indeed, the Department budget is less than E$1 million. The situation would be helped if so many of the staff were not concentrated at headquarters in Addis Ababa—50 out of a total of 150. The Awash and Simien parks are tolerably staffed, Omo and the Rift parks half-staffed, and the rest have nobody. Early this year, Awash Park had 14,000 cattle in it. The national parks have no regulations despite years of promises. Nevertheless, the overall situation is much better than it was a few years ago.

The General Manager's immediate contribution to the skin trade was to circulate a leaflet to tourists on arrival in Ethiopia asking them to help in stopping the trade by not buying skins; he hopes to try to control the trade sufficiently to reduce it to a trickle in two years. This may be preferable to an outright ban, which could well be impossible to enforce in a country with the size and enforcement resources of Ethiopia. (In the southern states of the USA over 100,000 alligators are allegedly poached every year.) But a regulated trade, while it could bring considerable financial benefit to Ethiopia and help the image of wildlife in this emergent country, could only be operated effectively with the support of consumer countries, and the attitude of several European countries has already been noted. Japan's response is likely to be pragmatic, and despite protestations to the contrary, the recent court case involving a majority of major US furriers (see *Oryx,* May 1973, page 7) casts doubt on the good faith of the fur merchants there.

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The mere production of these booklets (the mammal one was first published in 1967) by such a wide range of often diverse interests is an achievement in itself and a good justification for publication. The law is spelt out simply and clearly, and upheld by all the interests represented, including the Gamekeepers' Association. Those of us who work in the countryside know how often it is broken, and that the use of poisons for destroying raptors is increasing rather than diminishing. The problem now is how to get these booklets into the hands of the people who should read them. They deserve the widest publicity, and conservation organisations must seek the widest distribution for them. All members of the FPS in UK should read and keep a copy themselves and give away copies freely to countryside acquaintances.

DAVID JENKINS