DISTRIBUTION UPDATE OF THE ARABIAN WOLF (*CANIS LUPUS PALLIPES*) FROM SAUDI ARABIA

Peter L. Cunningham and Torsten Wronski

Affiliation: King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre, Thumamah, P. O. Box 61681, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Zoological Society of London, Conservation Programmes, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4RY, United Kingdom. Email: pckkwrc@yahoo.co.uk

Introduction

Since the first Arabian wolf records in late 1880's from northern and central Saudi Arabia their actual distribution has been sketchy with wolves never viewed as being very common throughout their range. Although widespread throughout Saudi Arabia earlier publications indicate wolves either from the mountainous south western Asir, northern rocky areas bordering Jordan or the central areas around Riyadh. Being an understudied species, Arabian wolves are probably more widespread than currently documented and accordingly the species is listed as Least Concern (LC) with a stable population trend with a CITES protection status of CITES Appendix II. The status of wolves in Saudi Arabia is difficult to determine due to a lack of research and systematic census although estimated numbers vary between 500 and 700 animals. The only official census in Saudi Arabia to date was conducted during late 1999 and early 2000 by Sinibaldi et al. (2000) who concluded that the overall numbers might be higher albeit still in a decreasing trend. The aim of this paper is to update the distribution of Arabian wolf in Saudi Arabia by providing recent locations and data from unpublished field reports difficult to access from outside Saudi Arabia.

Methods

Data were collected through a search on the literature published from Saudi Arabia including unpublished reports (grey literature) by various authors, samples collected from the wild and stored for genetic analysis at the King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre (KKWRC) and recent (2008/2009) sightings by the authors.

Results

This paper confirms an additional 64 confirmed wolf sightings (i.e. live, dead, tracks, prey) since 1999 with the most recent sighting being of a female captured in a box trap on 15 November 2009 approximately 30 km north of Riyadh in central Saudi Arabia.

Discussion

The Arabian wolf, against the odds, tenaciously survives throughout much of its original distribution range in Saudi Arabia. A lack of herding of domestic livestock and abundant and ubiquitous refuse in Saudi Arabia may also have contributed to the wolf's successful persistence as they may achieve densities in relation to the available food source. They suffer greatly from persecution with "hanging trees" – sites (often trees) traditionally used to display wolves (as well as other predators such as hyena, caracal and leopard) – testament to their encounters with humans (Figure 2). Notwithstanding this persecution they are still viewed as numerous in certain inhospitable mountainous areas by Bedouin who often loose domestic stock to wolf predation. In a recent survey in the western Asir (An Namas/Bisha area) the wolf carcass encounter rate was 0.12 wolves per km. Elsewhere, they are expected at lower densities and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are highly mobile seasonally in Saudi Arabia. The importance of establishing and maintaining protected areas (including active enforcement thereof) in the mountainous areas of Saudi Arabia would not only benefit wolves, but also other species (e.g. ibex, mountain gazelle) facing a tentative existence. Wolves may be able to re-establish in areas where active persecution is limited such as in certain protected areas as recently confirmed from the Ibex Reserve (approximately 180 km south of Riyadh) in central Saudi Arabia.

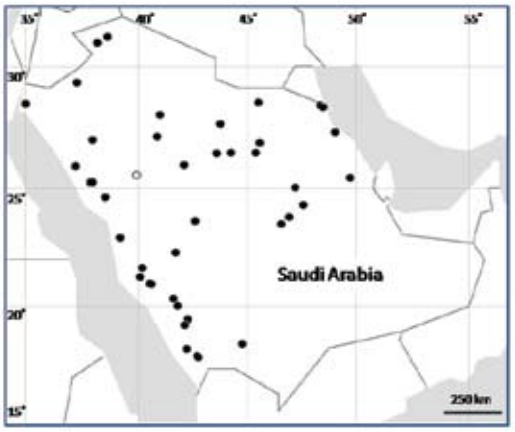

Fig. 1: Wolf distribution in Saudi Arabia.

Fig. 2: Wolf carcasses in hanging tree in the An Namas area, western Saudi Arabia (©Cunningham).

The greatest threat to wolves is increased human population and inevitable conflict leading to active persecution, transferable canid related diseases (e.g. rabies) and better veterinary care of free ranging domestic stock thus limiting carcasses for scavenging and predation. On the other hand wolves have become habituated to humans and being opportunistic omnivorous foragers with a high reproductive rate may ensure their survival in an otherwise marginal environment.

Acknowledgments

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