



Hana Ahmed Raza

This conservationist is on a mission to save the last Persian leopards of Iraqi Kurdistan

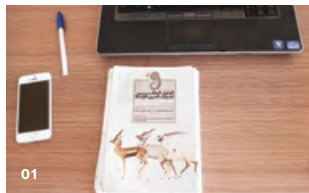
In her role as project manager for Nature Iraq, Hana Ahmed Raza's work schedule is split between the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Nature Iraq office. She often makes field trips to the Zagros Mountains to hunt for large cat trails, set camera traps and document sightings of the Persian leopard



‘Most people who go to the mountains and see an animal will shoot it,’ says Hana Ahmed Raza as she prepares to head to Nature Iraq’s office in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, where she works as a project manager for the NGO’s Persian leopard conservation project. The Kurdish biologist is arranging a trip to collect a DNA sample from the pelt of a female Persian leopard, an endangered leopard subspecies living in parts of Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, southeastern Turkey and the Caucasus region.

The Persian leopard is under threat because of hunting, land mines left over from the war in the 1980s and habitat destruction from oil drilling and construction, Raza says. The animal was thought to be extinct in Iraq until she managed to track down and photograph a male leopard in the wild in 2011. Now, Raza’s working on a three year project, launched in partnership with the Kurdistan Botanical Foundation and the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, to build a protected wildlife conservation corridor crossing the Iran-Iraq border. Named the Peace Park, it will stretch from Qaradagh and Hawraman in Iraqi Kurdistan

WRITER Cathy Otten
PHOTOGRAPHER Rawsht Twana



01 'Field Guide to the Mammals of the Middle East' always accompanies Raza on field trips. 'It's very useful to show villagers so they can tell us which animals they've seen,' she says

02 When not in the field, Raza works from the Nature Iraq office in Sulaimani

03 Raza measures and takes DNA samples from a Persian leopard. 'I read the report of its killing in the local media in 2014 and just traced its skin. It's female, the first hard evidence for possible leopard reproduction in Iraq'

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to the Bozin and Marakhil and Shaho Kohsalan protected areas in Iranian Kurdistan.

Soon after graduating from the University of Sulaimani and a fleeting interest in wildlife documentary filmmaking, Raza joined Nature Iraq at the age of 22. Since then, she's been involved in major projects such as a programme to conserve the wild goat in Iraqi Kurdistan and wildlife medicine training for veterinarians. 'Being born in the mountains must have sparked my desire for wildlife conservation,' she says.

CO How did you track down the Persian leopard that you photographed in 2011?

HAR With the help of the forestry police, my team and I found a trail used by larger animals. We went there and got the picture. Leopards are shy animals, but they know how to live in the mountains and are adaptable. They're very rare because of the war and hunting. No one was looking for them though – that's why everyone said they're extinct.

That picture was the first and only hard evidence of the existence of the leopard in Iraq. Before that, there were only unconfirmed records in literature, which weren't enough to prove it. People would tell me, 'There's no way that leopards still live here' and I said, 'Let's just try and see'.

CO When you saw that first picture, did it feel like all your hard work had paid off?

HAR It got a lot of attention. I sent it to all our colleagues and partners and everyone was so excited about it. No one actually believed we would prove there was a leopard living in Iraq, let alone get a clear picture or any picture at all.





The global population of the Persian leopard is estimated to be between 871 to 1,290, with the majority living in Iran. 'I can't tell you exactly how many are in the wild in our study area, it could be 10, it could be more, but our camera traps have taken pictures of three individuals and our team made a direct observation of another last year,' says Raza

CO Why is conserving the Persian leopard important to you?

HAR Large cats generally are important animals to conserve because they're top predators in the food chain. The food chain works like a game of dominoes, so if you take one piece out then the whole thing collapses. This is not just about the leopard. We will use the leopard as a flagship species, but eventually the park will nourish the whole habitat through different conservation projects, working with the people who live there and creating new livelihoods for them.

CO What are the main challenges in your work?

HAR Humans. Not just humans creating problems and threatening the leopard, but also not having enough people to work on conservation. We don't have many researchers doing this kind of work in Iraq. I don't just mean with leopards but all conservation work. Conservation is a new word for some in this country. Governments and political issues in general are major problems for us, especially now with the economic crisis. Because this is a trans-boundary conservation project, we have to convince three different governments: the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Iraqi government and the Iranian government. It's very difficult and very, very ambitious.

CO How do you take precautions against landmine injuries when you're out in the field?

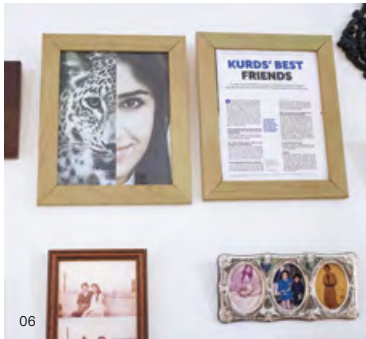
HAR We coordinate with the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency. They have maps of all the cleared and uncleared fields so we know roughly where the mines are, but you can't always rely on the maps because they're not very detailed. In the space of a few kilometres, there will be one field that's mined and another one which isn't, so we need to be careful where we work. We take local guides, usually shepherds and hunters who live in the mountains and know the safe trails, because we often go to areas where there's only one cleared path that's safe to walk on. We also work closely with the forestry police who live in the area.

04 Ahmawa in Halabja governorate – one of the regions through which the Peace Park wildlife conservation corridor will pass





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05 In March 2017, Raza was acknowledged for her conservation work in Iraqi Kurdistan with the Future for Nature Award

06 Family photographs hang from the wall of Raza's Sulaimani home, along with a framed article on her in Birdlife Magazine

07 Raza inspects a snake skin while in Ahmawa. Iraqi Kurdistan is home to a diverse variety of snake species including the Kurdistan viper and the zebra snake

CO Can you describe an average working day in the field?

HAR The drive to our study area takes an hour or two from our office in Sulaimani, depending on where we're going. We pick a site with the help of local villagers. With food, water and a GPS in our bags, we start hiking. Then we look for a good trail used by animals, identified by the scats or footprints left behind of prey species or leopards. We set the camera trap on the trail and clear the area in front of the camera, which is motion activated. We camp in that area if we're doing field observation, which we carry out for two or three nights, often at twilight – that's when the leopard is more active, at sunset and sunrise.

CO Practicality seems important for your job.

HAR When I've done conservation work for the leopard, emotions have never been involved, but it has kind of touched me in a way. I have always felt this connection to the mountains themselves. I'm from a Peshmerga family, and that's where they fought. This is where my passion for the leopards came from. In the mountains, I always feel this sense of peace and calm returning.