

'HABITAT LOSS FELLED LEOPARDS'

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Conflicts and habitat loss are major threats to the health of leopard populations.

India's leopard population may be only a tenth of what it was a little over a century ago, experiencing catastrophic declines due to human pressures. Given the threats the animal faces – conflicts with humans, poaching, habitat loss and availability of prey – a group of scientists with new insights on loss of leopard abundance say that an initiative similar to 'Project Tiger' is required for the cat.

The leopard population, perceived to be stable due to broad geographic distribution, suffered a possibly human-induced population decline of 75% to 90% between 120 and 200 years ago, the scientists propose, in a paper titled, 'Genetic analyses reveal population structure and recent decline in leopards (*Panthera pardus fusca*) across the Indian subcontinent' published in the journal *PeerJ – Life and Environment* on Friday.

Scientists from the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS India) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) used genetic data from leopards from across the subcontinent to investigate population structure and patterns of decline. They probed the demographic history of each sub-population and compared genetic decline analyses with countrywide local extinction probabilities.

The authors argue that the population decline in a species seen as wide-ranging and locally abundant suggest that leopards demand attention just like tigers.

Authors Supriya Bhatt, Suvankar Biswas, Bivash Pandav and Samrat Mondol from WII, and Krithi K. Karanth from CWS India, collected faecal samples from the Terai-Arc landscape of northern India and identified 56 individuals using a panel of 13 microsatellite markers, and merged this data with those of 143 other leopards. Genetic analyses showed four sub-populations — Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau-Semi Arid, Shivalik and Terai region with high genetic variation.

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