

Next-door leopards: First GPS-collar study reveals how leopards live with people

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The research team attaches a GPS collar to a leopard. Credit: www.projectwaghoba.in

In the first-ever GPS-based study of leopards in India, led by WCS and partners has delved into the secret lives of these big cats, and recorded their strategies to thrive in human-dominated areas.

The study concludes that leopards in human areas are not always 'stray' or 'conflict' animals but residents, potentially requiring policy makers to rethink India's leopard-management strategies.

The study was a collaboration of Vidya Athreya of WCS India (Wildlife Conservation Society), scientists from Norway (Morten Odden from Hedmark University College and John Linnell from Norwegian Institute for Nature Research), Sandeep Rattan of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, Maharashtra Forest Department and Asian Nature Conservation Foundation. Their findings were published recently in the journal *PLOS ONE* in the article "Adaptable Neighbours: Movement patterns of GPS-collared leopards in human-dominated landscapes in India."

Five leopards (two males and three females) perceived as "problem animals" and captured from human-dominated areas despite no predatory attack on people, were radio-collared for the study. Two were translocated and released more than 50 km (31 miles) away, while the remaining three were released near the site of capture.

The scientists monitored the animals' activities from the time of release, for up to a year, recording their behavior - including strategies they adopt to avoid direct contact with people.

The findings Immediately after release, the two translocated animals moved away 89 km (55 miles) and 45 km respectively (28 miles) from the release sites.

Said co-author Vidya Athreya of WCS India: "This indicated futility of translocation as a management strategy; this could have in fact, aggravated the conflict, as these animals passed through highly-human dominated (even industrial) areas," contended the scientists.

However, the animals applied tactics to avoid encountering people, despite dependence on their resources.

Firstly, the animals mostly moved at night, which timed perfectly with low human activity. They also spent more time closer to homes (

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