

Rare bactrian deer survives years of turmoil in Afghanistan

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A small population of this rare deer subspecies still survives in Afghanistan, says wildlife ecologist Zulmai Moheb, but the animals urgently need conservation attention. Credit: Wikipedia

Forty years of unrest in Afghanistan left wildlife ecologists uncertain whether one of the region's rare sub-species of red deer, the Bactrian deer (*Cervus elaphus bactrianus*), had survived in the country. But recently, for the first time since the 1970s, a survey team led by Wildlife Conservation Society ecologist Zulmai Moheb, with colleagues in Afghanistan, confirm that a small population exists. They say the animals urgently need conservation.

Moheb, a Ph.D. student in environmental conservation at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who is currently in Afghanistan studying

snow leopards, says that in the 1970s the Panj River in northern Afghanistan was known to have a population of Bactrian [deer](#), and a protected area was proposed. But fighting and disruption intervened, and more than 40 years later almost nothing was known about the area and its wildlife.

As Moheb and colleagues explain in a recent article in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Deer Specialist Group newsletter, the Bactrian deer prefers a rare habitat known as Tugai forest, shrubby thickets of tamarisk, willows, grasses and tall reeds growing along river valleys and flood plains of the Central Asian region. The deer's [global population](#) has fluctuated since 1950, with animals disappearing from a number of areas, the authors note. They faced pressure from hunting, habitat loss from gold panning and the pet trade. By the 1960s, Bactrian deer were believed to number only about 350 to 400, with populations limited to wildlife sanctuaries.

In November and December 2013, Moheb and colleagues conducted a field survey and confirmed that Bactrian deer are still present in Afghanistan by direct observation of a single live animal, indirect field evidence of others and reports by local people. For the latter, they used photos of large mammals known or suspected to have been historically present in each area. The researchers interviewed 77 men in 38 villages in the Darqad district of Takhar province in the northeast Afghanistan, and visited forests, rangeland and riverside habitat throughout the area.

They say the global population of Bactrian deer is believed to have increased from 350-400 in the 1960s to about 1,900 free-ranging animals in 2011, "thanks to [conservation](#) efforts in the former Soviet Union territory in Central Asia," but the animals in Afghanistan are in critical need of [conservation efforts](#).

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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