CATnews is the newsletter of the Cat Specialist Group, a component of the Species Survival Commission SSC of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is published twice a year, and is available to members and the Friends of the Cat Group.

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CATnews is produced with financial assistance from the Friends of the Cat Group.

Design: barbara surber, werk’s design gmbh
Layout: Christine Breitenmoser
Print: Stämpfli Publikationen AG, Bern, Switzerland

ISSN 1027-2992 © IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

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Fishing cat may not be extirpated in Pakistan: a call to survey coastal mangroves

Since the last assessment of the fishing cat Prionailurus viverrinus by the IUCN Red List in 2010, it has been assumed that this species may have been extirpated from Pakistan. However, recently published articles, surveys, and an incident of a captive fishing cat in southern Pakistan indicate that some populations might still occur in the country. Immediate field surveys for the species are warranted, especially, based on occurrence elsewhere in its range, in mangroves southeast of Karachi. Should fishing cats be found there, global species records and national protection efforts will need enhancement.

For about half a decade since the last assessment of the fishing cat by the IUCN Red List it has been announced that the species may have been extirpated from Pakistan (Mukherjee et al. 2010, Jutzeler et al. 2010). The last published records of wild fishing cats in Pakistan were in the 1960s and 1970s from the rivers of the Indus river valley, lakes and swamps (Roberts 1977), and then again in 2012 from Chotiari Reservoir in Sindh (Islam et al. 2015). A few years prior to these records, an ‘escaped’ fishing cat was reported from a residential area of coastal Karachi (Mirza & Omar 2008). However, the reliability of this record, and other such reports in the news, is questionable since no photographs were provided. Around the same time, feces and tracks encountered during field-based surveys in 2007/2008 were identified as being from fishing cat (http://www.fishing-cat.wild-cat.org/, notes on Pakistan). The take of fishing cats by hunters and demand for their capture is supported by their presence in the illegal wildlife trade market (F. Zubairi, pers. obs.).

In February 2015, Faraz Zubairi (FZ), engaged in the rescue and rehabilitation of animals in Karachi, Pakistan, received information of an anonymous person possessing a certain ‘wild cat’, who claimed it was a fishing cat, and requiring medical attention. He obtained photographs and verified that the cat was indeed a fishing cat (Fig. 1a). He speculated that the cat was obtained locally and possibly from within Pakistan, but given the sensitivity of the situation was unable to obtain further information on where the person obtained this fishing cat from. He later identified the cat to be a female, and found that it apparently had not left its 30x30x60 cm cage for, possibly, over two months. It was unable to move the lower half of its body, indicating severe muscular atrophy, presumably due to the insufficient space for it to move around in the cage. Its paws were infected since it had been constantly clawing and striking the cage when it felt threatened. In March 2015, the fishing cat was rehabilitated at the facility of a local trust with the use of a custom-built enclosure, including a water pond and a shelf (Fig. 1b).

Fishing cat is a protected species in Pakistan, where it is listed as endangered (http://eol.org/pages/1037335/details) and hunting is prohibited. Considering the approximate locations of these recent occurrences, and fishing cat records in remaining mangrove areas in other countries (e.g. Kolipaka 2006, UNI 2007, EGREE 2013, McKerrow 2015, Naidu et al. 2015), fishing cats might well be persisting in Pakistan’s coastal mangroves. This information beckons field-based sign and wildlife camera surveys to determine fishing cat occurrence in the remaining mangrove areas in Pakistan. These surveys can be initiated in the following locations with 5-20 km² of surrounding mangroves:

- the Thatta area (Approximate location 24°41’ N / 67°16’ E),
- Marho Kotri Wildlife Sanctuary (24°29’ N / 67°20’ E),
- an unnamed mangrove area south of Khadro Chan (23°54’ N / 67°36’ E), and
- remaining mangrove cover in the Keti Bun der South Wildlife Sanctuary (24°02’ N / 68°02’ E).

Data from such surveys will inform conservation interventions necessary for protecting the fishing cat in Pakistan.

Fig. 1. a) fishing cat in a 30x30x60 cm cage, in which it had been held for months. b) The same fishing cat after rescue and rehabilitation in private facility (Photos F. Zubairi).
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Michael W. Dulaney of the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden for providing guidance and information on fishing cat housing and care. We would also like to thank the many supporters of Fishing Cat Conservancy (FCC), which include Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, Feline Conservation Federation, University of Arizona Wild Cat Research and Conservation Center, Project Survival’s Cat Haven, Safari West, Idea Wild, Cedar Cove Feline Conservatory, the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, the Disney Conservation Fund, the Wildlife Conservation Network, and many individual donors. This support has helped FCC not only to establish community-based conservation efforts for fishing cats in India, but also to create collaborations with international citizens leading to the publication of such articles.

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Historical evidence of Pallas’s cat in Nyesyang valley, Manang, Nepal

Pallas’s cat Otocolobus manul skin was found with local people of Manang district, Nepal in 1987 when two of the co-authors (Paul O’Connor and Kea Andre) travelled there to film snow leopards. This evidence suggests that the Pallas’s cat has historically been living in Nyesyang valley. The specimen was hidden away as a private specimen and was not offered for sale in contrast with other carnivores known from the area, which were on offer to tourists for sale. Since the information on this rare Pallas’s cat is very scanty, this short communication will help to increase the knowledge about this cat in Nepal Himalaya.

Pallas’s cat also called manul, is a small wild cat species which is distributed in the grasslands and montane steppe of Central Asia. It has been classified as Near Threatened in IUCN Red List of Threatened Species due to habitat degradation, prey-base decline and hunting (Ross et al. 2015). It has been listed in CITES Appendix II. A live specimen has recently been discovered and photographed in Nepal’s Annapurna Conservation Area (Shrestha et al., 2014). However, the information on this rare wild cat is limited. This paper describes the historical presence of manul and other carnivores in Nyesyang valley, Manang district. It seems the cats along with other carnivores were hunted for trade in local markets.

From October to December 1987 and from February to May 1988, two of the co-authors (Paul O’Connor and Kea Andre) had travel-

Fig. 1. Kea Andre with Pallas’s cat skin in Ngawal Village in 1988. (Photo P. O’Connor).