

Developing Local Community Theatre Program in Iran

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Despite of severe loss of wildlife during the past couple of decades, Iranian biodiversity is still ahead of a majority of other Middle Eastern countries. It holds the most viable populations of Asiatic cheetah and Persian leopard in the world. As the most charismatic mammals, both carnivores occupy the top of the food pyramid in a variety of Iranian habitats. Therefore, their survival is in close correlation with the suitability and integrity of their ecosystems.

The Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) is considered as one of the most endangered felids in the world (IUCN 2008). It was once distributed from the Indian subcontinent through Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Iran to the Arabian Peninsula and Syria (Nowell & Jackson 1996), but in the past three decades, the occurrence of Asiatic cheetahs has only been confirmed from Iran, just a few dozen remained (Farhadinia 2004). Meanwhile, the animal suffered various threats, mainly due to human's who kill the animal because of lack of awareness.

Wildlife knowledge among the public is awfully scant, particularly local people who suppose the cheetah as an enemy to their stock and livelihood.

The endangered Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*) ranges over remote areas of west Asia; meanwhile, a considerable proportion of the subspecies population exists in Iran. Large areas of the country are still within the range of the Persian leopard and according to expert opinion, 550–850 animals exist in Iran.

Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) is a non-governmental, non-profitable organization in order to save the last remnants of the Asiatic cheetah population as well as other large carnivores, particularly the Persian leopard. Besides field research programs to obtain ecological knowledge about these species and their range, educational and outreach programs compose a remarkable part of the ICS mission, particularly through developing community-based initiatives.

The ICS use this well-known quote of Baba Dioum a cornerstone of its method in educational activities: ***“For in the end, we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.”***

In order to be effective, a variety of approaches have been applied since 2001 within urban and rural areas around protected areas for various target audiences, child to adult, educated to illiterate, men and women. Gradually, the ICS has been developing the most appropriate educational plan based on goals and target audiences traits. As a result, since 3 years ago “Conservation Theatres” project was begun.

Why Conservation Theatres?

In order to optimize our educational plan, a number of questions we try to answer:

What are our educational goals?

What is the place of implementation (indoor or outdoor)?

Whose are target audiences? School students, adults, shepherds, local authorities, women, men, hunter, etc.

How much time we have, is it a long term education program or a short term one?

Do target audiences ask to know more about this topic or we want to stimulate them to learn about it

During past decade, the ICS based on the above questions have developed various educational programs, and using our educational experience identified the need for an educational program that:

Attract audiences who don't have primary enthusiasm about the topic,

Can be implemented both indoor and outdoor (because equipment and facilities are not same around our country),

Be useful for various ages and kinds of audiences. For example different members of a family, children, father and mother, like it and learn from it.

Have flexibility to change context based on local problems (for example in some regions overgrazing is the major problem, and in some places poaching).

Be appropriate to short term educational program, and provide enough information in the time.

And, have a nice atmosphere that helps to build an emotional relationship between humans and the cheetah.

Consequently, ICS formed its theatre group in February 2011. 'Troubles of a Cheetah' was born.

Developing a theatre was a new experience for ICS, so we invited some theatre experts to cooperate with us. Finally, after 3 months, 'Troubles of a Cheetah' a theatre containing topics such as morphology features of cheetahs, differences between cheetah and leopard and treatments of cheetah in Iran was developed. This theatre has two characters, a cheetah and a hunter/shepherd (in middle of the show, the actor changes his outfit to become a shepherd to understand cheetah talks better). For more mobility and flexibility, stage equipment and outfits are very simplified. Moreover, a song was created support the theatre

Cheetah sings I'm your friend

As I mentioned before, 'Cheetah, Your friend' was created to support the theatre. While this song is an independent educational product and now ICS tends to create a video clip for it to release it independently. In this song a cheetah talks to audiences. For instance, he starts his song with these sentences:

"Don't be afraid of me, come closer, you are not my food" in follow up he describes his favorable food, his morphology, his habitat and at after explanation of various treatments that he faces in his life, he emphasizes that the Asiatic cheetah only lives in Iran now and we have to save it.

Traveling around Iran

'Troubles of a Cheetah' started its performances in Darabad Museum of Wildlife (Tehran). Then it was presented to protected areas authorities in Department of Environment of Iran (DoE) to issue the necessary permits to travel around Iran and to perform in rural and urban areas around protected areas where the habitat of Asiatic cheetah are. After this step, ICS Theatre group started its travel around Iran. Until now 'Troubles of a Cheetah' was performed in rural and urban areas around 9 protected areas and Tehran. That is, it was performed more than 30 times.

Alongside our performances, game wardens and local DoE authorities were invited to watch the show with local people and participate in it. After each performance is a good time to make conversation between local people and local DoE authorities and improving their relationship.



The theatre 'Troubles of A Cheetah' in Eshq Abad



Short speech by head of the CACP about the cheetah and locals' role to save it



*Local schools closed in Deyhouk for Theatre festival (above)
The theatre; 'Troubles of A Cheetah' in Deyhouk (below)*





The theatre; 'Troubles of A Cheetah' in Nayband village



Awarding students winning the art competition on Asiatic cheetah held by Ravar DoE



Discussion about the cheetah and other carnivores on educational posters "Morphological Comparison between Cheetah and Other Carnivores" in Rabat



In one of its last performances, it went to Tehran Zoo where there is a valuable collection of cats especially a Persian leopard. Tehran Zoo has visitors from around Iran as well as residents of Tehran. So, it's a relevant place to educate people about Asiatic Cheetah and other cats of Iran.

Combination of theatre and educational games

Educational games are the useful educational tools to increase the effectiveness of education. Various educational games were developed by ICS education team, and some of which were played in addition to performances. Educational games such as 'Cats Miniature jigsaw puzzle', 'Cats of Iran memory cards', 'Cheetah and Ladder' and 'Cheetah word puzzle'. These educational games are combination of fun and education and with them audiences would review issues that discussed in theatre one more time.

Leopard Theatre

After success of 'Troubles of a Cheetah' theatre, ICS theatre group expanded its activity by developing a theatre and a song about Persian leopards in early 2012. We hope this theatre has the same opportunity like the cheetah theatre to travel around Iran and help the conservation of Persian leopard.

Acknowledgement

'Troubles of a Cheetah' is a distinguished and successful educational program in Iran, based on cooperation of 41 staff, volunteers and friends of Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS). Furthermore, we are grateful to Conservation of Asiatic Cheetah Project in Iran (CACP), Iranian Department of Environment of Iran (DoE), US Columbus Zoo, Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF), and individual donors, particularly Saman Golriz for their support to develop and implement this project.

Youths participating in free discussion as the last episode of the festival in Rabat village





Elders describe their encounters with the cheetahs



The theatre; 'Troubles of A Cheetah' in Azadvar village



The theatre; 'Troubles of A Cheetah' in Tehran Zoo



Kids, adults and families try to solve the 'Cats Miniature jigsaw puzzle' in Tehran Zoo



Kids, adults and families play the big 'Cheetah and ladder' game in Tehran Zoo



Kids, adults and families play the big 'Cats of Iran memory card game' in Tehran Zoo