

## The smaller cats get less

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THERE WERE TIMES not long ago that Jungle cat, Leopard cat, Fishing cat, Marbled cat, etc. were abundant in the wild. And although these spotted or striped, small to medium sized cats are distributed almost all over India including the upper reaches of the Himalaya and the deserts, they are much sought after for their priceless fur, prized in the west as a status symbol, with India being a major source country. Due to the resultant hunting and extensive poaching, alongwith habitat loss, today their numbers have dwindled drastically.

The threat to the small cats have greatly been ignored especially as

compared to their bigger cousins, the tiger and the leopard. Species like the Desert cat, Fishing cat, Leopard cat, Rusty Spotted cat, etc. are listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and Appendices I & II of the CITES (see Table I) which entails that highest conservation effort be made to save them. Yet, apart from some minor enforcement successes, these animals still struggle to survive.

The story behind the decline of these cats only goes to show how a weak implementation of the law can undermine the protection of these creatures, already endangered or

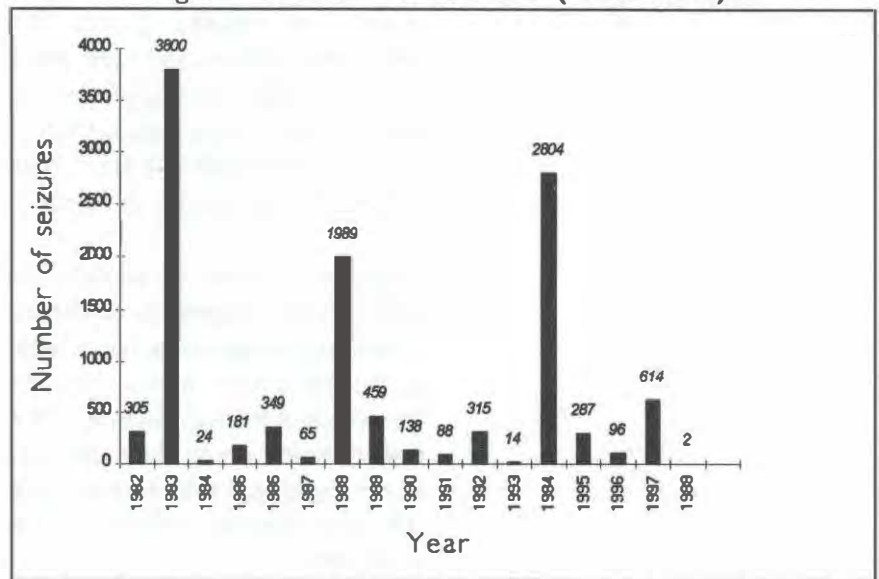
Table I

Species	CITES	Indian Wildlife (P) Act Schedule	IUCN Red Data Book*	J&K Wildlife (P) Act Schedule
Lynx ( <i>Lynx lynx</i> )	II	I	E	I
Jungle cat ( <i>Felis chaus</i> )	II	II	-	-
Leopard Cat ( <i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i> )	I	I	V	I
Fishing cat ( <i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i> )	I	I	V	I
Marbled cat ( <i>Pardofelis marmorata</i> )	I	I	E	I
Golden cat ( <i>Catopuma temmincki</i> )	I	I	E	I
Rusty spotted cat ( <i>Prionailurus rubiginosus</i> )	I	I	E	I
Caracal ( <i>Caracal caracal</i> )	I	I	E	I
Desert cat ( <i>Felis silvestris ornata</i> )	II	I	E	IV
Pallas cat ( <i>Otocolobus manul</i> )	II	I	IK	I

\* E - Endangered; V- Vulnerable; IK- Insufficiently known

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Fig 1 - Smaller cat seizures (1982-1998)



Note : The year-to-year variation in data is because there is no formal data collection mechanism for wildlife crimes.

vulnerable. Trade in the skins of small cats is deeply entrenched, as the poachers are not being strictly brought to book, with the result that there are repeat offences.

From the trade data gathered by the Wildlife Preservation Society of India on illegal trade of small cats, it has been noted that the most vulnerable are the Jungle cat, Leopard cat and Fishing cat which together account for about 90% of the total small cat seizures since 1979. On the basis of poaching and trade data collected from Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa and other states. Fig. 1 shows the small cat seizures made in the last 16 years. Some of the vital seizures have been as follows:

(a) About 3000 Jungle cat skins and 400 Desert cat skins - Delhi, 1983;

(b) 1200 Jungle cat and 700 Desert cat skins - Delhi, 1988;

(c) About 2000 Jungle cat skins - Railway station in Jammu & Kashmir and Pathankot (Punjab), 1994;

(d) About 400 coats made from Desert cat - Srinagar, 1995;

(e) About 200 Desert cat skins - Puri (Orissa), 1995; and

(f) Over 200 Jungle cat and Leopard cat skins - 1997.

Besides the above, a lot of seizures have been made of products such as coats, footwears, gloves and other garments which utilise a substantial amount of these cat skins. For instance, the number of skins required to make a full-length coat may be 40-50 in the case of a species like the Rusty spotted cat.

In Jammu & Kashmir, skins and fur are important trade products. The state has its own Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1978 (see Note below) wherein many of the provisions of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 have been diluted. Poaching in smaller cats continues unabated in other states as well, e.g. West Bengal, Assam, Rajasthan, UP and Maharashtra, with protected areas facing threat from poachers and trappers, nomadic hunting tribes and pelt dealers.

The skins and products are smuggled initially to nearby places like Kathmandu (Nepal) and from there on to the West, particularly Europe and the USA. In fact, with Kashmir in unrest, many Kashmiri traders have shifted their operations to Nepal.

Since the commercial demand for pelt is mainly dependent on the international market, there needs to be rigid trade control and a strict enforcement of the law. Because, if the traders hold on to their declared stocks for long, it will become more difficult to stop the onslaught on the small cats.

#### **References**

NOWELL, K. and P. JACKSON (Eds) (1996) - *Wild cats: Status survey and conservation action plan*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

GOPAL, R. - *Fundamentals of Wildlife Management*.

#### **Note :**

*The Jammu & Kashmir Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1978 is largely similar to the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act,*

*1972 except that it does not carry the amendments of 1986 and 1991. As a result, the threatened status of a large number of commonly traded species for fur and pelts such as Desert cat, Red fox, Desert fox, etc., is not properly reflected. Common leopard; and Tibetan Antelope are listed under Schedule II in the state Act, whereas these are in Schedule I of the central Act. and in Appendix I of CITES. Noteworthy is the complete exclusion of the Jungle cat, one of the most common species in fur trade, from the list. Trade in the other above mentioned species is permitted under Section 8 of the Jammu & Kashmir Wildlife (P) Act for which a "Special game hunting license" need only be obtained. When the Act came into force, all traders possessing any Schedule I or Schedule II, Part II animal had to declare it and were allowed to export fur and garments out of their declared stock. This led to traders increasing their stock by obtaining "procurement certificates" and also illegally recycling their existing stock. Due to poor implementation of the Act, the permits issued for exports far exceeded the declared stock.*