

Publication

The Snow Leopard Project and Other Adventures in Warzone Conservation by Alex Dehgan (2019) 288 pp., Hachette Book Group, New York City, USA. ISBN 978-1-610396967 (hbk), USD 16.99.

In *The Snow Leopard Project* Alex Dehgan provides a compelling account of his work to establish the Wildlife Conservation Society's programme in Afghanistan. The aim of the programme is to assess the status of wildlife and establish protected areas—a particularly challenging task given the security situation arising from the Taliban insurgency and the active minefields from the earlier Russian invasion. This book is a great read on many levels: not only featuring the biology of an incredibly interesting area at the crossroads of several biogeographical realms but also covering the unique culture and history that have grown from Afghanistan's position at a crossroads on the Silk Road. Dehgan also provides anecdotes that offer a glimpse of the travails and joys of establishing a country programme and conducting field work in areas that are challenging because of crumbling infrastructure and their remoteness and security issues. It is all delivered from Dehgan's unique perspective as an Iranian–American and from the moxie and mettle gained from his diverse experiences: those of a lawyer developing environmental laws in post-Soviet Russia, of a PhD student studying the susceptibility of lemur species to extinction, and finally to Iraq, where he worked with the U.S. Department of Defense to redirect Iraqi scientists.

Dehgan first provides an illuminating background to the long history of conflict in Afghanistan. He then describes the surreal life in Kabul upon his arrival in 2006, amid the dangers from improvised explosive devices and mine fields, and the billions of dollars of development funds floating around. The latter

created a surprising archipelago of consumption amongst the expatriates seeking to spend hardship supplements and per diems. In this mix of humanitarian workers and war junkies hoping to get rich quick, he managed to set up a team and office as well as build relations with other NGOs and Afghani government officials. All the while he was navigating the politics of USAID, the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Defense, and working to curtail illegal exports of wildlife and wildlife products, especially by military personnel but even by humanitarian workers.

The Wildlife Conservation Society's focus area for snow leopards, Marco Polo sheep and other species is in the remote Wakhan corridor, the topographically complex narrow strip of Afghanistan territory that separates the Pamir Mountains to the north and the Karakoram Mountains to the south (Mishra & Fitzherbert, 2004, *Oryx*, 38, 102–105). The high valleys of the corridor have been a trading route since antiquity, used by travellers such as Marco Polo. In this enchanting and rugged area, Dehgan and his colleagues managed to obtain good data on rangeland condition and the status of the Marco Polo sheep and snow leopard populations, as well as build relations with leaders of both dominant ethnic groups—the Wakhis and Kirghiz—for the establishment of several protected areas in the region. Much of the work in the Wakhan corridor focused on establishing a peace park straddling the borders of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Tajikistan, something first proposed by Russia in the 1930s. Later chapters deal with the political and logistical difficulties of establishing the peace park, including a first meeting in Urumqi, China, of limited success, and the next meeting in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

Although titled *The Snow Leopard Project*, arguably the book's most interesting chapters

are those in which Dehgan searches for the Kashmir musk deer and cheetah in the far east and west of Afghanistan, respectively. The search for the musk deer found evidence of many large mammals (Stevens et al., 2011, *Oryx*, 45, 265–271) and was ultimately successful (Ostrowski et al., 2016, *Oryx*, 50, 323–328) unlike the search for the cheetah, although it did uncover tantalizing potential evidence of the species.

Dehgan also describes the work at Band-E-Amir, Afghanistan's version of the Grand Canyon and first National Park, established in 2009 after Dehgan left Afghanistan. This area in central Afghanistan is known for its six deep blue lakes separated by natural travertine limestone dams, and even better known for the nearby Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan, which were tragically destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Much of this chapter deals with efforts to reach consensus from Afghan ministries and local stakeholders to apply for UNESCO world heritage and national park status, and with challenges such as mines, lack of infrastructure and disorganized development along the lakes.

Dehgan's passion for Afghanistan and its people, and his hopes for the country's future, are clear but as the security situation deteriorated he was forced to leave in 2008. He has left us a great read filled with interesting digressions and pearls of historical information. *The Snow Leopard Project* is a refreshing portrait of Afghanistan, and the book will be of particular value for those more familiar with the past and present conflict in Afghanistan rather than its incredible biological and cultural diversity.

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