



## **The city cat conundrum: Evidence, conjecture and conservation support for leopard in Guwahati city, northeast India**

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Large carnivore conservation is a challenging endeavor due to their need for large home ranges, sufficient prey, access to water, and low human interference. These factors render urban landscapes challenging areas to sustain large carnivores, especially, if the landscape is a metropolitan city with an estimated human population of 1.1 million and growing each year. This is presently the case of Guwahati city of Assam in India, where cases of human-leopard conflicts are a common occurrence. The city is spread over 216.79 km<sup>2</sup> area with an altitude of 49.5–55.5 m, and is surrounded by 18 hills with eight reserve forests and two wildlife sanctuaries and a Ramsar site within city limits (Purkayastha 2018). Although the space available in the form of hills within the city and surrounding protected areas might seem enough for leopard persistence, in reality these hills within Guwahati are isolated islands with very little to no connectivity at all. This has inevitably resulted into human-leopard conflicts in Guwahati and it is on the rise.

To solve such a problem there is a need for proper diagnosis which is unclear in case of human-leopard conflicts in Guwahati. A substantial grey area persists in leopard ecology and the drivers of leopard-human conflict in the region. There is no answer to even the most basic question of how many leopards are present in and around the city. While it has been claimed repeatedly in newspapers and magazine articles, and recently in Guha (2020), that a ‘good’ number of leopards are resident in the hills in and around Guwahati city; however, there is no reliable estimate available. Moreover, the claim of a ‘good number’ is worrisome and leads us to question, what is a good number?



Furthermore, while it has often been claimed that there is an ongoing rampant encroachment and hence conflicts are on the rise, there has been no study on the scale or intensity of loss of habitat or connectivity. Another factor mentioned for rising conflicts is the livestock depredation which aggravates locals and compels them to retaliate. However, there is no concrete evidence or published information on the number or scale of livestock loss and general perception of locals towards leopards. It has been claimed that leopards depend on livestock; however, several studies reported that the feral dogs are the major part of their diet in the city. While conjecture plays a crucial role in science, its validity in conservation support and use in formulation of management or mitigation strategies is questionable. This lack of information is the foremost reason behind no such management strategies being formulated in the city on this issue.

However, in response to the reported growing conflict, it is fortunate to see rise in support for leopard conservation from civil society organizations in Assam and especially Guwahati. The involvement of primarily journalists, activists and students is welcome. The *living with leopard* initiative (<http://cpreecervis.nic.in>) supported by WWF India is a major education, outreach and capacity building drive that is active in Guwahati and other parts of Assam. Another important campaign which started in 2014 was the ‘*Save the Phantom*’ (<https://www.wti.org.in/news/save-the-phantom/>) supported by Wildlife Trust of India Rapid Action Project (WTI RAP) and David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF), which now operates as an NGO named Phantom for the leopard conservation cause in the region. While education, outreach, capacity building are essential tenets of conservation, this needs to be supported by evidence and sound ecological science. A major missing thread in thrust towards leopard conservation and mitigation of conflict is the involvement of a dedicated ecological research team which thrives to understand the drivers of leopard presence, and rising conflicts to provide and communicate sound mitigation strategies.

It is heartening to see that the North Kamrup Forest Department has indeed initiated a camera trapping study in Amingaon area (<https://www.eastmojo.com>) with 50 cameras installed in Sila Reserve Forest of Changsari, this a welcome first step in regards to understanding leopard presence and behaviour in the outskirts of the city and the results of the study are early awaited.



## References

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