

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION

Expedition/Project Title: The Lone Wolf Project 2005

Travel Dates: 29th June – 12th September 2005

Location: Simien Mountains, Northern Ethiopia, Africa

Group Members: George Busby, Richard Hoolahan, Clare Marsden, Julie Grant

Aims: To assess the factors, both ecological and human, affecting the density and distribution of the Ethiopian Wolf (*Canis simiensis*) in the Simien Mountains. This was investigated through a combination of ecological field studies and interviews with local people.

Introduction

The Lone Wolf Project (www.lonewolfproject.org.uk) was a 10 week University expedition which aimed to examine the status of the Ethiopian wolf *Canis simiensis* (Fig 1) in the Simien Mountains of Northern Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian wolf is a territorial, social carnivore. As a result of its specialist diet which consists almost exclusively of rodents, it is restricted to the Afro-alpine habitats of Ethiopia. With continuing threats of habitat loss, hybridisation, persecution and wildlife disease, less than 550 individuals remain. Consequently the Ethiopian wolf is classed as the world's most endangered canid (Ashenafi *et al.*, 2005; Marino, 2003).

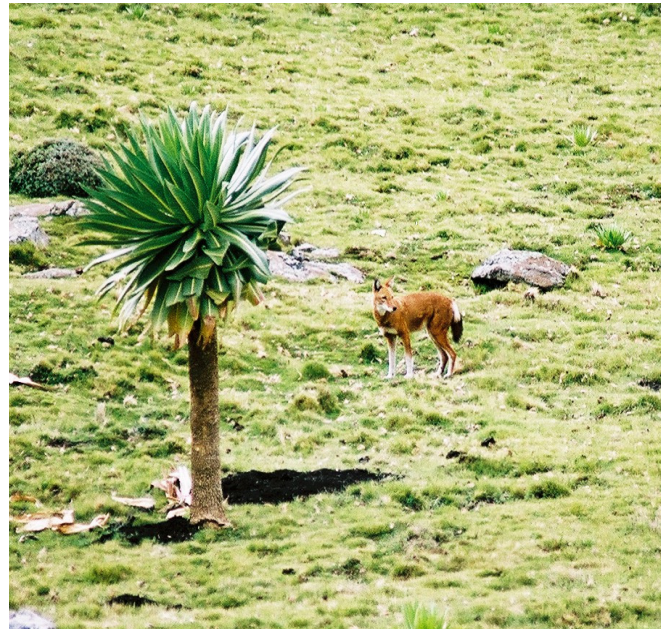


Fig 1 The Ethiopian wolf

The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Project (EWCP) in association with the IUCN Canid Specialist Group, has conducted extensive research on the largest population of wolves in the Bale Mountains to create the IUCN conservation action plan for this endangered species. However, the other six populations, remain largely unstudied. Consequently their effective conservation is being hindered by a lack of baseline knowledge. The Simien Mountains contains an estimated population of 50 - 70 wolves (Sillero-Zubiri & Macdonald 1997). Situated in one of the most densely populated rural areas of Africa, the IUCN have highlighted that further research is urgently needed on this population of wolves (Gotelli and Sillero-Zubiri 1992).

The aim of the Lone Wolf Project was to determine the status of the Simien Mountains wolf population. This was achieved through ecological and anthropological studies. The scientific research collected data on the distribution and abundance of wolves, the diversity and density of rodents, the extent of livestock grazing and general habitat quality. The anthropology used informal interviews to research the extent of human wildlife conflict in addition to assessing how conservation affects local communities.

Results & Discussion

Previous population estimates suggest approximately 50 – 70 wolves inhabit the Simien Mountains. The Lone Wolf Project surveyed approximately 30% of the available wolf habitat in this area and noted between 22 – 37 wolves. With extrapolation this gives an estimate of between 70 - 120 wolves for the Simien. However, despite these promising findings, the expedition found extensive evidence of degradation and loss of the Afro-alpine habitat as a result of human related activities such as agriculture (Fig 2) and livestock grazing.



Fig 2 Agriculture is widespread in the Simien and causes considerable habitat degradation

Surveys of rodents in areas with and without livestock indicated that grazing negatively influences the Ethiopian wolf because it results in a lower abundance and diversity of rodents. This means that home ranges are larger and therefore fewer wolves can be supported in an area. This reduction in rodents is likely to have contributed to wolves attacking domestic livestock, an event reportedly rarer in populations where rodent populations are high.

The Simien Mountains is home to a number of other endemic and rare species such as the Gelada baboon (Fig 3) and Walia Ibex, not to mention various plant and bird species. As a result any degradation and loss of Afro-alpine habitat has likely to have a negative impact on large number of species.



Fig 3 Gelada baboon

Results from the anthropology suggest the Amharic people recognise that conservation of wildlife is important because it generates money through tourism. Consequently persecution in the Simien Mountains is rare. However, local people have concerns that conservation of wildlife will result in a loss of grazing and agricultural land, which is essential to the survival of these communities.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the survival of this population of wolves relies on the threat of habitat loss being addressed. However, without the involvement of the people whose lives are intimately involved with that of the wildlife of the Simien, there can be little chance of constructively helping conservation in Ethiopia. It is clear that in order to address the conservation needs of the wolf and other endemic Ethiopian wildlife it is unequivocally important to include the needs of the people local to the area and those whose lives are also deeply entwined with the mountains.