

# FOOD HABITS OF LEOPARD (*PANTHERA PARDUS FUSCA*), DHOLE (*CUON ALPINUS*) AND STRIPED HYENA (*HYAENA HYAENA*) IN A TROPICAL DRY THORN FOREST OF SOUTHERN INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Accepted May 2005

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Food habits of the Leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*) were studied in the Sigur (Nilgiri district) and Thalamalai (Erode district) Reserve Forests of Tamil Nadu, southern India from June to October 1997. A comparison of Leopard food habits with the diet of the co-predators, Dhole (*Cuon alpinus*) and Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), in the study area was carried out to understand niche overlaps. Chital (*Axis axis*) was the major prey of the Leopard in both areas; found in 40% leopard scats in the highly disturbed area (HDA) and 65% in the less disturbed area (LDA). Other important prey species were Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*), Blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*), Black-naped Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), Indian Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*), Indian Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), Common Langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) and Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The Leopard had a wider niche-breadth value in the highly disturbed (0.32) than in the LDA (0.20). The food niche of the three predators – Leopard, Dhole and Striped Hyena overlapped considerably. Niche-overlaps were higher in the less disturbed than in the HDA. Prey preference estimates showed that the most favoured prey of the Leopard was Chital. Domestic livestock formed a sizeable portion of the Leopard diet in both areas; more in the highly disturbed (33.3%) compared to the less disturbed (14.7%). Twenty cases of livestock kills by Leopards were recorded during the 5-month study. Anthropogenic pressure is not the direct reason; depletion of prey base caused by disturbance and higher encounter rate with domestic livestock are possibly the reasons.

**Key words:** prey preference, *Panthera pardus fusca*, *Cuon alpinus*, *Hyaena hyaena*, conflict, thorn forest, southern India