



NATIONAL PARKS OF IRAN

NATIONAL PARKS OF IRAN, including national nature monuments, wildlife refuges, and protected areas.

The first conservation law (the Qānun-e šekār-e Irān), passed in 1956, created the Game Council of Iran (Carp, p. 163). In view of the large size of the country and the limited funds at the disposal of the Game Council, it was recognized that, if a significant percentage of the available resources were to be allocated to areas of special importance from an ecological point of view, the efficacy and success of the conservation effort would be greatly enhanced. Thus was born the concept of “protected regions” (later designated protected areas), where hunting would be prohibited unless a special license was obtained from the Game Council; besides, utilization of rangeland and forest incorporated within their confines was subject to restrictions promulgated by the Game Council and the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Wezārat-e kešāvarzi wa manābe‘-e ṭabi‘i).

Proposals for the creation of wildlife parks were advanced in later years, shortly prior to the submittal of a new bill to the parliament (Majles), which, when enacted into law in 1967 (Qānun-e šekār wa šayd), established the Game and Fish Department of Iran (Sāzmān-e šekārbāni wa nažārat bar šayd). That law incorporated and clearly defined the concepts and legal aspects of both wildlife parks and protected regions. Protected regions were created to provide conditions conducive to the regeneration and amelioration of representative habitats and/or endangered species. Such regions were also envisaged as centers of breeding stocks for the repopulation of wildlife species



that were on the wane in adjacent areas. Any part of the country could be declared a protected region; the presence or absence of a human population was legally immaterial, but in practice an effort was made to exclude villages and other habitations. Restrictions on hunting and fishing were enforced, while grazing, woodcutting, and the like were curtailed in accordance with regulations enacted jointly by the Game and Fish Department and the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The wildlife park classification was applied to those reserves within which human habitations and exploitation of resources had been excluded through a process of upgrading protected regions, or which were under the full control of the Game and Fish Department. In short, wildlife parks enjoyed much the same status as national parks elsewhere, except for provisions for regulated sport hunting.

In 1971, a new Department of the Environment (Sāzmān-e ḥefāzat-e moḥīṭ-e zist), into which the Game and Fish Department was incorporated, was created by an act of the parliament. At this time, some six wildlife parks and thirty-five protected regions had been established. Recovery of vegetation and attendant wildlife populations had surpassed expectations in the majority of these reserves. In terms of certain emerging demands of resource use and management, however, the need for a revision of the reserve classification was deemed expedient. These demands may be summarized as follows:

(1) Outdoor recreation and education. The increasing standard of living in Iran had brought with it a demand for non-consumptive out-door recreation. Then, as now, on an average summer weekend, an enormous number of private automobiles as well as buses and taxis departed from Tehran, destined for numerous recreation sites. A similar pattern was emerging throughout the country with urban residents fleeing the cities on weekends. The wildlife reserves constituted a vast resource for recreation and the promotion of concepts of conservation. Several thousand people were already visiting the Moḥammad-Rezā Shah (now called Golestān) National Park in Golestān (formerly [Gorgān](#)) Province during the summers of the mid-1970s, despite the inadequacy of suitable facilities.

(2) Research and base-line monitoring. The result of over a decade of ecosystem protection in most of the reserves had by now produced conditions which would serve as models for this part of the Eurasian continent. Classifications and/or zoning plans were necessary to ensure that certain areas



would receive the recognition and future protection that they merited. It was clear that many Iranian reserves were worthy of inclusion in the lists of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) and similar programs.

(3) Wildlife protection and harvesting. The conservation movement in Iran began with strong emphasis on wildlife management. It was intended to ensure that a large number of reserves would continue to be managed on a primary use basis for wildlife. These included habitats for the propagation of endangered species, waterfowl refuges, endangered habitats, and numerous areas targeted to be managed for optimum wildlife harvests. In many of these areas, a degree of manipulation had proven of great value in enhancing wildlife populations. It was hence deemed essential to designate reserves in which such manipulation was justified, in contrast to categories in which natural processes should govern. A good example is the monitoring and feeding of the Persian fallow deer in the Dašt-e Nāz Wildlife Refuge enclosure, into which they had originally been released. Another example, is the capturing and culling (by hunters) of an excessive population of gazelles in the Muta (Mouteh) Wildlife Refuge (Isfahan Province).

(4) Plant protection and plant succession. The improvement in vegetation conditions in a number of reserves was well beyond any limits of expectation. For example, approximately 22,000 hectares of moving sand dunes existed in the Kavir protected region (Pār-k-e melli-e kavir, Semnān Province) at the time of its establishment; but following eight years of protection from grazing, such species as the shrub *Haloxylon ammodendron* (saxaul, Pers. *siāh tāg*) and the grass *Stipagrostis plumosa* (Pers. *sabṭ-e pā-kutāh*) had pioneered the area. Not only had 80 percent of the sand been stabilized, but in parts the once-barren area was taking on a steppe-like appearance. The cost, which entailed only protection from grazing or plant destruction, had been about six American cents per hectare per annum; whereas conventional sand dune treatment costs by the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources to obtain results within perhaps three, four, or more years would usually exceed USD500 per hectare.

Thus was defined the concept of "Trust Lands," that is, the lands of strategic value to the nation, which were badly degraded, but could be rehabilitated on an economically extensive basis, primarily through natural processes.

(5) Multiple land-use models. The Department of the Environment had been singularly successful in managing "single use" reserves, that is, nature



sanctuaries, but it realized that the success of any Iranian organization in managing areas on a multi use basis had not, up to then, been particularly remarkable. A number of the reserves, however, offered an opportunity to serve as land use models, containing as they did, a wide spectrum of land use practices. It was recognized that this constituted an urgent need in the country at this time, which, with respect to the classification of the reserves, eventually led to the adoption of the following four categories: (a) large areas of outstanding national significance, within which outdoors recreation, education, and research should receive high priority; (b) relatively small areas or remnants, containing outstanding or unique examples of floral, faunal, or geological phenomena; (c) a variety of areas in which wildlife management was of prime consideration; and (d) those significant areas that are in need of substantial amelioration, or within which guidelines for multiple use may be drawn.

Scrupulous care was taken to determine the nomenclature that would, in both Persian and English, convey reasonably accurate ecological connotations for these areas. The following names were chosen to represent the respective categories: Pār-k-e melli (national park); Ātār-e ṭabi'i-e melli (National nature monuments); Panāhgāh-e ḥayāt-e waḥš (Wildlife refuge); and Menṭaqa-ye ḥefāẓat šoda (Protected area). This classification, included in the comprehensive Environmental Law (Qānun-e ḥefāẓat wa behsāzi-e moḥiṭ-e zist) presented to parliament and approved in 1974, departs somewhat from conventional terminology, including that of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN; see Lausche). An effort was made to solve through education the problem concerning the designation of national park, as most citizens associated the term park with the urban environment. Below is a very brief summary of the definitions and criteria for the respective reserve categories, citing only the cardinal points.

National park. National parks are large areas of national significance representing outstanding examples of Iran's natural heritage, which are set aside in perpetuity for the preservation and conservation of outstanding natural animal and plant species, habitats, geological features, landscapes, and spectacular scenic beauty, for the benefit, education, and enjoyment of the people of Iran. They provide opportunities for visitors to develop an understanding and appreciation of the values of natural history in a manner consistent with the perpetuation of the inherent values of the park. They are controlled and managed by the Department of the Environment; their



boundaries may not be altered, and no portion of them may be subject to alienation.

Criteria expressing the national significance and integrity of a park and reasons for its establishment as a national park are ascribed to those areas that have, *inter alia*, (a) a natural character sufficiently superior in quality and beauty to make its preservation imperative; (b) are of unique scenic, geomorphologic and landscape features; (c) possess diverse and/or unique examples of biotic communities and ecosystems; and/or (d) present a sufficiently comprehensive unit and size to permit public use, management, research, etc.

Eight national parks were established prior to the Revolution of 1978-79, two of which are briefly described below:

The first area to be designated a national reserve was Moḥammad-Rezā Šāh Park (now called Golestān National Park), an area of approximately 93,000 hectares located about mid-way between Gonbad-e Qābus and Bojnurd in Golestān Province in northeast Iran. The mountains in the western portion of the park are covered with a climax forest of Tertiary origin to which the Caspian climate, still prevailing here, has imparted a special luxuriance. As one moves east, the forest gives way to scrub and then to lush steppe vegetation with attractive stands of juniper and scrub maple. The abundance and diversity of wildlife, in both the forested area and the montane steppe, is quite remarkable and includes the red deer (*marāl*), roe deer (*šukā*), and wild boar (*gorāz*) in the former, and large herds of the urial sheep (*quč*) and ibex (*pāzan*) in the latter, while among the larger predators, leopard (*palang*) and brown bear (*kers*), can be seen in both. The birdlife too is astonishingly rich; some 160 species have been recorded in the late 1970s.

The Lake Rezā'iyā National Park (renamed Lake Urmia), located in northwestern Iran was the country's largest lake, with an area of about 470,000 hectares in years of average precipitation. It was extremely saline, and thus contained no fish but supported rich hatches of brine shrimps and growths of algae. These provided abundant food for large numbers of waterfowls, notably breeding greater flamingos, white pelicans and common shelducks (*tanja*). One hundred eighty-six species of birds had been recorded for this park in the 1970s. This lake, with four islands of fair size and about 100 small islands, or mere outcrops of large rocks, many of which provided breeding places for a number of the bird species, was not only of spectacular



beauty but a unique ecosystem which merited inclusion in the MAB reserves. It is, however, tragic to relate that the lake has almost completely dried up as a result of the construction of dams on the rivers that discharged into it, without considering the future of the lake, the largest body of water in Iran!

National nature monument. This is the definition of small areas of land, air and, water that have been designated for preservation, protection, and management because of the value inherent in their natural, physical, or artificial state. The objective is to secure preservation of a special site, area, or living species of flora or fauna that illustrate outstanding examples of typical as well as unique or unusual phenomena of the nation's geological and ecological natural history. Sites or areas designated as such may or may not be opened to visitors depending on the requirements of the feature(s) to be preserved.

Prospective sites for this category have no minimum size, but boundaries are clearly described, which sufficiently ensure the integrity of the feature within the site. Criteria were set forth to assess the unique and representative nature of a site in terms of national significance, such as, outstanding geological formations; a habitat supporting a vanishing, rare, endangered or restricted species; zoogeographic features unique to the distribution and survival of the associated fauna and flora, etc.

Among the ten to twelve sites that seemed appropriate for protection in this category were (to name only a few) the semi-active volcano Mt. Taftān (see [ĀB-E GARM](#)) and a mud spring, both in Baluchestān Province, and a tar spring in [Dehlorān](#) Sub-province, Khuzestan. Two sites were soon classified and placed under this category: the first, two extremely small stands of *Lilium ledebourii* (*susan-e čelčērāg*), a species unique to Iran (a beautiful lily); and the second, a 227-hectare stand of *Alnus subcordata* (Pers. *tuskā-ye yaylāqi*), representing the last significant remnant of this once extensive Caspian lowland alder forest.

Wildlife refuge. Wildlife Refuges are areas of representative habitat types set aside: (a) for the conservation and management of native wildlife and the protection and management of its habitat that include an area or areas for the feeding, breeding, spawning, resting, wintering, staging, shelter and other needs of wildlife, and the enhancement or restoration of these land or water areas; (b) within which hunting, fishing trapping, killing, poisoning or capturing of wildlife or collection of flora or other objects is prohibited, except



where such activities are consonant with scientific or management purposes; (c) where settlement and human activity shall be restricted, eliminated, or prohibited as regulated by the Department of the Environment; (d) in which recreational use by the public shall be secondary to the primary purpose of management for wildlife and vegetation enhancement or restoration.

An area suitable for designation as a wildlife refuge is a land unit of any size, typified by one or more of the following criteria: (a) wetlands of national or international significance displaying the highest biological productivity of faunistic, floristic, limnological, hydrological, and ecological importance; (b) seasonal refuges for concentrations of native species, migration routes, breeding, feeding, or wintering areas; (c) areas containing vanishing rare or endangered species, or assemblages of species; (d) habitats suitable as managed game ranges, game breeding areas or fenced enclosures, for the recovery and amelioration of species whose survival and recruitment may be in jeopardy or require special management.

Most of Iran's wetlands will fall under the wildlife refuge category, although Aržan marsh and Parišān Lake in Fars, surrounded as they were by terrestrial sites of spectacular and ecologic appeal, obviously merited inclusion in the National Park category. The Dašt-e Nāz reserve in Māzanderān, under intensive management for the rare Persian fallow deer (*Dama mesopotamica*; *gavazn-e zard*), and the Dez and Karḳa reserves, which contained the last remnants of the wild populations of this species and its riparian habitat, were also designated wildlife refuges. One reserve, Miānqal'a, uniquely enough, fits all the criteria for this category! This reserve encompasses Gorgān Bay and its brackish and fresh-water marshes, seasonal mud flats and the Miānqal'a Peninsula with its extensive sand dunes and psammophilic vegetation. It contained large populations of waterfowls, game birds, large mammals, and numerous other species.

Protected areas. Protected area defines the land that, because of its strategic value to the conservation of the nation's natural resources, is to be managed in a manner that will prevent degradation, or, if already degraded, can be rehabilitated primarily through natural processes. Protection, management and restoration of plant and animal life and the maintenance of the natural state will be afforded the highest priority in providing conditions conducive to the regeneration and amelioration of habitats and species. Protected Areas may be established to serve a multitude of environmental conservation and protection needs.



Protected areas have an important function in the role they can play in meeting scientific, economic, educational, cultural, and recreational needs. Such areas are irreplaceable for studies of various ecosystems and are of fundamental importance to the protection of natural biotic units representing major bio-geographical regions and characterized by distinct flora, fauna, and vegetation types or combinations of these. Criteria for the protected area category are too numerous to enumerate here, but it must be stressed that the scope and intent of this classification in Iran was wide-ranging (for details, see Firuz and Harrington).

Five marine reserves existed under the Game and Fish Department's system of protection and five others had been proposed. Tied as they were to adjacent terrestrial areas, they were also to be treated in accordance with the above classification system.

Biotic community reserves, managed by other organizations, warrant a brief mention here. These include the Imperial Hunting Reserve on the eastern border of the city of Tehran. Established sometime between 1792 and 1830 in the reign of Fath-'Ali Shah Qājār (1212-50/1797-834), this large reserve (about 140,000 hectares) was managed by a special office of the imperial court for the royal family and their distinguished guests. Neglected at times in the past, the reserve was well guarded and managed in the last decade prior to the Revolution of 1978-79. The reserve contained substantial populations of such species as wild sheep, Persian ibex, gazelle, and partridges. Vegetation recovery showed much promise in many areas.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources maintained a number of forest parks, designed primarily for picnicking. While heavy use had eliminated the understory of these reserves, they constituted important remnants of the Caspian lower forest belt genera, such as *Quercus* (see [BALŪṬ](#)), *Acer* (see [AFRĀ](#)), *Zelkova* (see [ĀZĀD](#)), and *Parrotia* (*anjili*).

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND STRATEGY

The Department of the Environment placed overwhelming emphasis on natural processes. It may be said that major stress in the reserves was placed on the protection of the vegetation, for this served both to stabilize soil and watersheds and to enhance the terrestrial and aquatic faunal populations while also serving to protect remnants of the national flora.



It has been often suggested that multiple use is the only viable approach to nature conservation in developing countries. For a variety of socio-economic reasons, however, such an approach would have been unsuccessful in the formative stages of the Iranian reserve program. In fact, the strategy and the source of success at that time had been to develop single or priority-use reserves, whether for ecosystems or/and wildlife, in order to insure preservation of the resource. Having succeeded in protecting viable populations of plants and animals, the department began to turn its energy toward integrating wildlife into multiple use land practices. Through the application of existing legislation, and the cooperation of the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the Department of the Environment hoped ultimately to ameliorate conditions in the interspaces between reserves in order to avoid genetic isolation of plant and animal populations.

Following the Revolution of 1978-79, the Department's activities and, in particular, the establishment of the reserve system, were impugned and denounced as having been part of an agenda to provide benefaction and entertainment for members of the royal family and the rich. In regard to the Department of the Environment, there was a degree of equivocation in the disparagements, especially as Article 50 of the new Constitution made the protection of the environment a national duty. Indifference to or, sometimes, rejection of the tenets of conservation and observance of environmental laws and regulations in the succeeding years led to catastrophic declines in wildlife, the destruction of forests and rangeland, and the pollution and alteration of wetlands and rivers. A major negative effect was the expulsion and/or resignation of the majority of the most qualified Department of the Environment personnel, as well as many of the ablest environmental officers. Thus the supervision and protection of the reserves was seriously impaired, not to mention the cessation of investigations and monitoring that were previously routinely undertaken in many of these areas. Eventually reactions of dismay and censure developed to such an extent among the people, especially the young, that even the highly controlled press became increasingly attentive. Articles were published indicating declines of 80-85 percent for wildlife, the despoliation of the country's reserves and wetlands, and the deterioration of nature in general (e.g., see *Hamšahri*, Tehran, 13 Efsand, 1383).

Nearly half a decade or so after the Revolution, the authorities began to take an interest in the reserves; more and more were added to the roster of these,



while many of the extant reserves were split into two or even three of different categories. The names of the categories (as described above), remained the same (being cited in the environment law), but little attention has been paid to the reasons for this classification; hence such aspects as ecological criteria, wildlife management, or land use, have generally been ignored and often the political decisions or personal preferences of the relevant executives have been sufficient for the choice of the designation of a reserve.

The most recent data shows the following number of reserves in existence in Iran: 26 national parks; 35 national nature monuments; 42 wildlife refuges, and 150 protected areas. It should be noted, however, that some 37 reserves are part of, or within, other reserves. This also applies to ten of the national parks, which are part of either wildlife refuges or protected areas, many, as sometimes called, being the core areas of these reserves (a factor, which would, in a number of cases, inhibit visitor programs). One national park, Lake Urmia, with progressively greater abstraction of water from the inflow of its rivers, is almost completely dry; equally [Lake Baktagān](#) with a surrounding mountainous area in Fars, which encompasses both a national park and a wildlife refuge, has dried up for the same reason.

It seems that no attention has been paid to the fact that the network of national parks, if carefully managed, constitutes a vast resource for recreation, tourism, and education. Only organized trophy hunting trips are a part of the department's established routine for the reserves. National parks, wildlife refuges, and protected areas are treated alike in respect to visitation by the public. Special permits must be obtained for entry, an environmental guard must accompany visitors for any hiking or outings, and no sorts of facilities are provided for the public. According to published reports in the Iranian press (e.g., in the Tehran newspapers *E'temād* and *Šarq*), effective enforcement of protective measures in the reserves is generally lacking or poor. Livestock grazing is not adequately controlled, resulting in the decline and often destruction of the vegetation and thus the habitat for wildlife in many reserves. Indeed, apart from widespread poaching, cases have been reported of tree cutting, even within some national parks (cf. NBSAP, p. 20).

The total area of the reserves mentioned above is given as 16,676,734 hectares, which is slightly more than double the area that was under protection 35 years before, when the number of reserves was about 70. This is approximately 10 percent of the total area of the country, which was considered an acceptable



proportion. It is also noteworthy that, during the past generation, the heightened concern and concerted efforts of many international organizations in respect to conservation and the protection of the world's natural resources have resulted in a very appreciable increase in the creation of such reserves, particularly in the developing countries. For instance, IUCN's tabulation of figures for the percentage of protected areas in each of the countries of the world in 2010 cites 26.28 percent for Brazil, 22.42 percent for Poland, 14.5 percent for Indonesia, and 31.26 for Saudi Arabia; Iran is measured at 7.08 percent (WDPA).

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