

Humans

- a leopard's bane or boon



Picture: the skull of a leopard (*Panthera pardus*)

'*Panthera pardus*' - a child-like voice, trying to pronounce the leopards' scientific name, is coming out of my cassette recorder. It is 2006 and I am sitting on the floor in my children's room. This is how I first learnt an animal's scientific name. And there were many more to come as I went on to become a zoologist.

But the leopard came and never left. When I was little, the mysterious cat was fascinating and I thought that everyone who gets to see it is incredibly blessed. But the history of mankind and leopards is multifaceted and on multiple occasions blood-soaked on either end.

One such occasion happened in Rudraprayag, India, in 1918, where a leopard was feeding on human prey. 125 people were killed during this time, but the number of victims is likely higher due to unreported attacks and people that succumbed to their wounds. Not many people are aware of it, but a leopard's bite is often infected as they feed on carcasses and carry bacteria between their teeth. The elusive cat in Rudraprayag escaped spring traps, dug out of boxes falling down, and remained silent in a barricaded cave until people were sure it had died and curiously unlocked the cave. In total, it escaped those traps for eight years. A remarkably long time comparing it with their regular

lifespan of up to 17 years. Therefore, this individual had turned to human prey quite early. By recreating its life, the hunter, Jim Corbett, found that it most likely fed on diseased humans who died of the Spanish flu and turned to prey on humans when the pandemic was over. These deaths, as tragic as they are, clearly show the stealth and power this cat holds and which still captivates many.

This fascination is a double-edged sword as it makes leopards a desired trophy to hunt. They are poached for their skins, bones and teeth which are used in traditional Asian medicine and in African ceremonies. When it comes to dangers there are many, that constantly decimate leopard populations. Even though they are the most adapted of the big cats, their habitat shrinks due to urbanization. Where it once reached from Siberian forests to savannahs in east Africa, there are towns and cities now sprawled across the landscape and the space for wildlife decreases.

But thanks to the fascination these big cats evoke in us there is support for creating refuge areas and national parks. *Panthera pardus* has a history with us and using this fascination for its protection it will have a future.

Pia Voitz

Quellen

Jim Corbett „The leopard of Rudraprayag“
<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.461459/page/n3/mode/2up> (story)

Leoparden im Artenlexikon
<https://www.wwf.de/themen-projekte/artenlexikon/leoparden-allgemein/>