

Georgia's Lost Gazelles

“We must fight against the spirit of unconscious cruelty with which we treat the animals. Animals suffer as much as we do. True humanity does not allow us to impose such suffering on them. It is our duty to make the whole world recognize it. Until we extend our circle of compassion to all living thing, humanity will never find peace.”
-Dr. Albert Schweitzer

In a world that grows more human-dominated every day, a world filled with human wars and misfortunes, the natural world struggles to find safety amid changing surroundings. Some animals have adapted to the human sphere and become house pets, workers, or nourishers. Some animals have taken shelter in the few remaining pockets of wilderness and are dependent on the will of mankind to keep their homes pristine. Many animals, however, have not been so lucky. Unable to adapt at modernization's frenzied rate and cut off from wilderness's protective embrace, they are stranded in a world that they cannot begin to comprehend. The unconscious cruelty of humanity kills daily, and it is our responsibility – indeed, our duty – to preserve a place in this world for all living creatures and bring peace to the animal kingdom.

Years ago, if you were to travel south of the peaks of the Caucasus Mountains and into the golden grasslands nestled in their foothills, you would have found a beautiful example of this kind of peace: small farms and herds of livestock living in harmony alongside eagles, bears, wolves, and gazelles. Today, the healthy ecosystem that flourished in what is now southern part Georgia is barely recognizable. Animals are the primary victims. Bears have left to escape human encroachment, eagles and wolves are struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile environment, and the gazelles have not been seen in over 20 years. Conservationists in the region have been fighting to keep the

predators of southern Georgia alive, but without the presence of the gazelle, a key species in the ecosystem, little can be done to save one of the world's biodiversity hotspots.

The goitered gazelle, known locally as the *jeylan*, disappeared from Georgia's grasslands in the 1980s (Large Herbivore Network). Although the species has the largest geographical range of any antelope, spanning much of the Middle East and Central Asia, it is the only antelope native to Georgia (Large Herbivore Network) (Kingswood). With all large mammal populations decreasing in this country, the survival of one of Georgia's most important ecosystems could be dependent on this small ungulate (Kingswood). The goitered gazelle is an inhabitant of semi-arid grasslands and steppes; they form semi-nomadic herds of varying size and are highly dependent on the availability of open grassland (Large Herbivore Network). Human use of gazelle grazing lands has drastically reduced their numbers worldwide, and experts estimate that their total population currently numbers between only 40,000 and 50,000 individuals (Large Herbivore Network). An animal whose home range once stretched across an entire continent now fights for survival.

The causes of the goitered gazelle's decline and eventual extinction within the territory of Georgia include both natural and human-caused factors. Gazelles worldwide are endangered by extreme seasonal changes, such as periodic cold spells that occur every 7 to 8 years. Heavy snowfall in these times and drought in winter can cut a gazelle population by 20% (Large Herbivore Network). These natural fluctuations in population size were augmented by human activity, both direct and indirect. The most direct threat to gazelle herds was illegal hunting that, at times, was heavy and poorly regulated. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the sudden decline in the enforcement of wildlife-

protection brought on a period of increased abuse of natural resources and poaching which further degraded a landscape already nearly devoid of gazelles (Large Herbivore Network).

Human use of the goitered gazelle's natural range has also posed a problem for herds. Gazelles can travel up to 30 kilometers a day and are largely dependent on the availability of edible vegetation, especially in summer, when it provides nearly all of the gazelles' water (Large Herbivore Network). Human settlement reduces and fragments these territories, hampering the gazelles' ability to graze freely. Heavy use of pesticides and herbicides in the Soviet era also had an effect on global gazelle populations; chemical runoff from nearby human farms causes immense environmental damage and a lethal disruption of the goitered gazelle's ecosystem.

An enormous threat comes from domesticated animals and the practices of their owners. Among the main predators of the gazelle, along with foxes, raptors, and wolves, are domestic dogs (Large Herbivore Network). Shepherds' dogs and feral populations living in the outskirts of developed areas had an adverse effect on gazelle populations in Georgia. Kept away from well-protected livestock, the dogs would often turn to young, sickly, or injured gazelles as a food source. Livestock populations themselves also affected gazelle herds, competing for grazing lands, food, and water. Though gazelles and livestock tend to eat different types of vegetation, overgrazing creates a serious problem for gazelle herds (Large Herbivore Network). Livestock populations have been known to quickly degrade semi-arid pasture, killing not only the plants edible to them, but those that feed indigenous fauna. Because of the livestock's lesser water efficiency, permanent inhabitation of watering areas is often required to maintain herds and gazelles that cannot

obtain enough moisture from their regular diet are left with no alternative source of water.

The Georgian gazelle population, in particular, has suffered because of its location. The transcaucasian population of gazelles, of which the Georgia herds were a part, has long been physically isolated from other populations by large mountain ranges; thus, their numbers cannot be bolstered by influx from other populations. Local human conflicts have also had a toll on gazelle numbers. With refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict numbering close to 1 million, the lands on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border, home to the last remaining gazelle populations, were inundated with human migrants and unusual environmental stress (Large Herbivore Network).

If Georgia is ever to reclaim its vibrant natural history, the return of the goitered gazelle is essential. A key species in the local ecosystem, this ungulate may have the power to hold together the fragile biodiversity of the South Caucasus. With gazelle herds also declining in Azerbaijan, the establishment of a stable Georgian population would be a boon to all transcaucasian gazelles (Large Herbivore Network).

In 2010, a new and reinvigorated effort to bring home the goitered gazelle initiated a fresh reintroduction project. The World Wildlife Fund and the World Bank have contributed funds to help establish a population in Georgia's Vashlovani National Park, which will be able to sustain an estimated population of up to 1000 gazelles (Getiashvili) (Kingswood). USAID gave a \$35,000 grant for the construction of a special breeding enclosure that would hold an initial herd of 10 individuals (Georgian Ministry Report). These ten gazelles, the first on Georgian soil in 20 years, would be a gift from the Turkish government, taken from Ceylanpinar, a breeding facility that began its own

reintroduction program after a Turkish extinction and is now home to approximately 800 gazelles (Large Herbivore Network).

In 2010, I was invited to help bring the 10 gazelles from their home in Turkey to the enclosure in Vashlovani. I spent three weeks in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, preparing for the release and volunteering with Georgian conservation organization NACRES. After the gazelles had been shipped by helicopter from the Ceylanpinar breeding facility, I crossed the Turkish border with a group of Georgian scientists and politicians to take the ten small crates and their precious cargo to their new home on the easternmost tip of Georgia. After over 24 straight hours of driving, we finally reached the newly-built breeding enclosure. As a cold morning sun rose over the bare hills, gazelles set foot on ground that had been mourning their loss for twenty years.

The Vashlovani herd has grown since the release, but a successful reintroduction is still a distant hope. Even if the breeding continues as planned, these fragile creatures face a trying existence. Through the several attempts that have been made to bring this mammal back to its home range, emphasis has been put on enforcing its protection and safeguarding its home. This is, of course, essential to the goitered gazelle's survival in Georgia, but it cannot happen with the help of scientists and politicians alone. The focus of this reintroduction effort should shift now to the people of Georgia, to the hearts and minds of the humans that share the gazelle's homeland. For centuries, the *jeylan* has been sung in folksongs, danced in villages, and woven into the rich fabric of Georgia's cultural heritage. It is time for the people of Georgia to reclaim their history and take the gazelle's life – their country's life – into their hearts. The very people who drove this beautiful

creature from its hills can bring it back and ensure that the sound of gazelles bounding through the grasses will never again be lost.

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