

Left to themselves, leopards will leave us alone, says wildlife biologist VIDYA ATHREYA >>>

## DON'T SHOOT A CORNERED CAT

**I**N THE last fortnight, there have been three instances of leopards being killed by mobs. One in Karad, southern Maharashtra, the other in Faridabad in the National Capital Region and the third in Orissa. In all these cases, the leopard was outside a forest, in a town or a village, and in no time a mob formed and killed it. That the leopard injured a few people does not come as a surprise. Even we would attack anyone trying to kill us.

What were the leopards doing near towns and villages?

In 2001, in response to leopard attacks on people in sugarcane-rich areas in western Maharashtra, the state forest department decided to support Project Waghoba, a research project on leopards, with the aim of finally reducing conflict.

Until then, there were only opinions

but no facts on why leopards were found in human habitations. Our first task was to find out the number of animals living near human settlements, then to understand what they were feeding on in an area without any wild herbivores, to assess the loss to the farmers, and, finally, to understand whether these animals lived in the sugarcane fields or were only passing through.

The methods we used were many: camera traps to identify individual leopards; scat analysis to know what they eat and interviews with the locals to understand more about the leopard-farmer interaction. Finally, we put GPS collars on the leopards to track them.

The results surprised us: leopards were found in places of high human densities; they fed on domestic animals, mainly

dogs, and crept up on houses to nab goats. We also found that they avoided people.

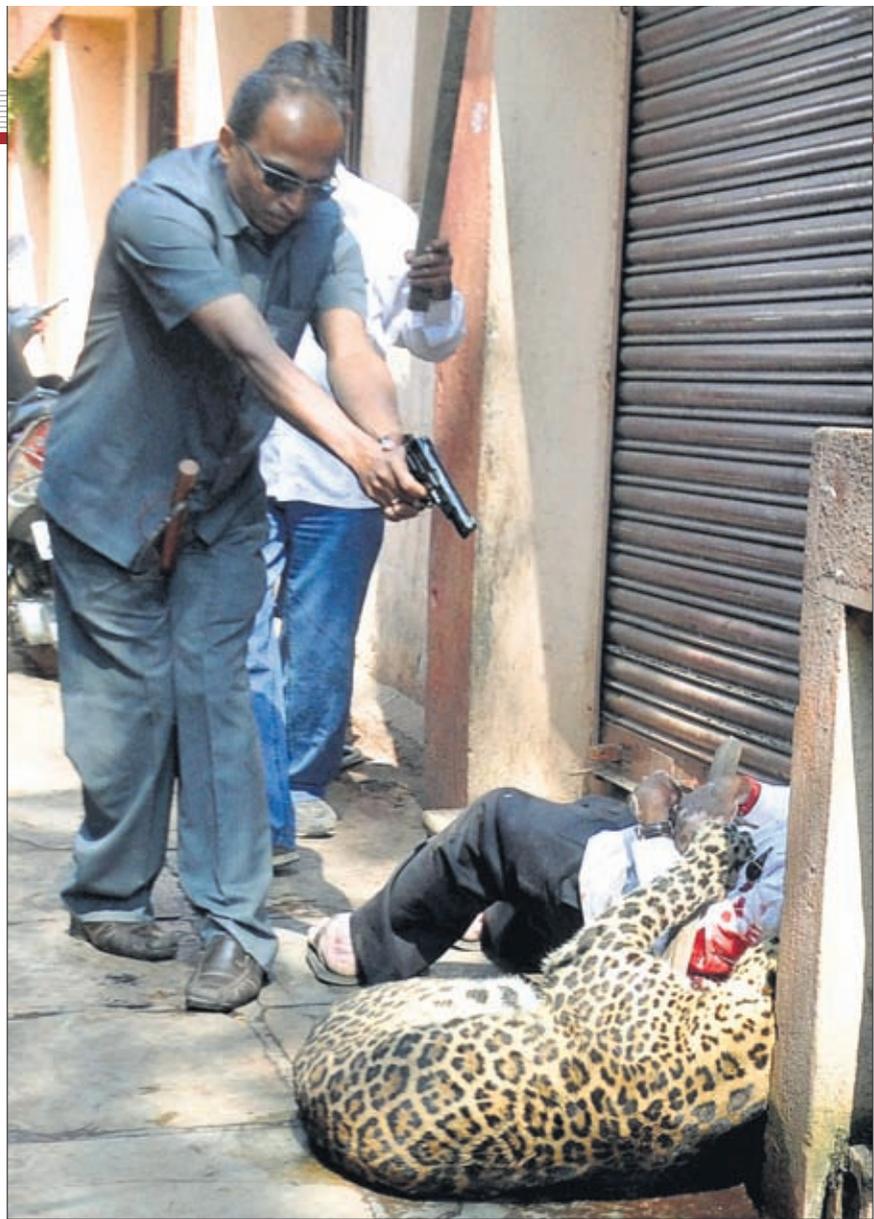
In a town in Maharashtra not much smaller than Karad that we studied as part of our project, two leopards would sit in the sugarcane fields all day. Farmers could work undisturbed, even if the animals were 20 metres away; in fact, they were hardly aware of the animals' presence. It was at night that the cats would venture out to the garbage dumps where pigs and dogs had gathered. There were 11 adult leopards in my study site and an equal number of hyenas but the animals never killed any person. They injured people only when troubled and chased.

Leopards, hyenas, wolves and other smaller carnivores, can easily adapt to human-dominated landscapes. While issues like habitat destruction affect less adaptable species like the tiger and the elephant, leopards are superbly made to live anywhere, surviving even on rats and frogs.

There is a lot of filth in our towns and villages, which attract hundreds of dogs and pigs. In every place that I have visited as part of my work, from Jammu and Kashmir to Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu to Maharashtra, leopards follow the trail of dogs and pigs. But what is commendable is that the cats go out of their way to avoid humans and attacks are rare unless we trouble them.

The problem arises when, in anger and panic, we chase leopards. That is the worst thing to do since the animal reacts to defend itself. We have to remember that it is a wild animal, extremely scared of us, but equipped with more-than-perfect armour (claws and teeth). The appropriate reaction should be to leave it alone. To protect itself, it will take shelter in a dark corner, away from humans. If we barricade that area, the police and the forest department have the opportunity to deal with it effectively, without anybody getting injured. In 2005, in Sangamner town in Maharashtra, a mob had formed to chase a leopard away. But the police took effective action, and controlled the crowd. I accompanied a wildlife doctor, who had been called to tranquilise it, and even though it took us five hours to reach the town from Pune, the people were safe and the animal could be removed unharmed.

This is not a situation unique to India. Even in Europe and the Americas, wild animals venture into human settlements. They do not understand man-made boundaries,



A police officer shoots a leopard in Karad, Maharashtra

nor do they realise that domestic animals are off-limits. Where there is a high density of domestic animals and a good habitat, there will always be leopards, hyenas and wolves. In India, policymakers are yet to use this information to change the way wildlife is dealt with outside protected areas.

Left to themselves, leopards will leave us alone. They have strong social bonds. And the mother teaches her cub, who she takes care of for a year and a half, to stay away from people.

It is important that they are not trapped as we often pressure the forest department to do.

Our work has shown that in most cases when leopards attack without provocation, it is near sites where the trapped cats have been released. Like our house cats, leopards also tend to return home. In a densely populated country like India, a leopard walking through a new area is a recipe for disaster.

**The worst thing you could do is chase a leopard and provoke it. Instead, leave it alone. It will always take shelter in a dark corner, away from humans**

That their numbers are more than tigers does not also mean that we can rest in peace. To make up for the decreasing tiger numbers, hundreds of leopards are poached each year for their bones and skin. It is important that we not worsen the problem by increasing the possibility of conflict.

Steps that would help tackle such situations include quickly and fairly compensating the livestock losses farmers face, empowering local forest departments by filling in the large number of vacancies, and training officers to effectively handle emergencies. The media and the public have to be made aware that the animal is a terrified creature in such situations and only attacks to save its life.

In all three situations recently, the police should have controlled the mob. In the face of an unruly crowd, it is impossible for any rescue to be carried out. But in the long term, cleaning up our dirty towns and villages so that feral pig and dog populations decrease is the only way we can reduce encounters between wild carnivores and humans in this densely populated land. □