**ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ALULA (RCU) – PRESS RELEASE 31 JULY 2019**

**Saudi Arabia’s Royal Commission for AlUla Announces Birth of Two Arabian Leopard Cubs in Significant Boost to Critically Endangered Subspecies**

* *The male and female cubs born in Saudi Arabia to 10-year-old mother Hamms represent hope for the renewal of a subspecies estimated to be less than 200 strong in the wild*
* Cubs born on 22 April have passed crucial 12-week development milestone and undergone first examinations and vaccinations
* *Major step in RCU’s ongoing role as the guardian of nature and the environment of North West Saudi Arabia and among portfolio of Arabian Leopard Initiatives (ALI)*
* Follows signing of $20 Million partnership between RCU and Panthera to help preserve big cats internationally including Arabian leopards

**KSA, AlUla:** 31 July 2019: Saudi Arabia’s Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) has announced the birth of two Arabian leopard cubs, as it commences a breeding programme to help preserve and eventually reintroduce the critically endangered big cat subspecies back into the wild in the North West of the Kingdom as part of its portfolio of Arabian Leopard Initiatives (ALI).

The two cubs, one male and one female, were born on 22 April at the Prince Saud Al-Faisal Wildlife Research Centre in Taif in the North West of Saudi Arabia. The cubs have now passed a critical developmental milestone passing 12 weeks and were recently vaccinated by veterinarians.

The successful conception and birth of the cubs is a significant moment as the RCU commences its Arabian Leopard Initiatives (ALI), aligning it with the goals and objectives of the RCU Charter to deliver a sensitive and responsible transformation of the AlUla region and protect its nature and wildlife.

The initial 12-week period was the most critical for the newly born Arabian leopard cubs, as it is for all newborn leopards. It was during this period that they successfully bonded with their 10-year-old mother Hamms *(which means whisper in Arabic),* learned important behaviours and grew stronger in the seclusion of their den before they were visited and vaccinated. The cubs will remain with their mother for the next 18 months to two years in line with global best practice for captive breeding programmes.

Commenting on this exciting development for the future of the Arabian leopard, Minister of Culture and RCU Governor His Highness Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Mohammad bin Farhan Al Saud said: “This is an historic moment in our efforts to reintroduce the Arabian leopard to the AlUla region. With fewer than an estimated 200 Arabian leopards remaining in the wild globally, this is one of the most critically endangered animals in the world, and these cubs represent a new beacon of hope for the renewal of a subspecies on the brink of extinction. It is our duty to protect, conserve and build population numbers to preserve the species from becoming a footnote of history.

“That is why the RCU is actively championing the revitalisation of the Arabian leopard to support the future of this rare and majestic big cat that is native to AlUla. The birth of these two cubs will be the first of many as our specialised captive breeding programme grows and develops – boosted by the support of local experts, as well as global partners like Panthera.”

The RCU’s Arabian Leopard Initiatives (ALI) combine several projects working toward the preservation of this critically endangered subspecies including an extensive captive breeding and reintroduction programme, as well as the establishment of the Global Fund for the Arabian Leopard.

As a Centre of Excellence, RCU is establishing a steering committee with leading experts from around the world to enhance and inform ALI’s captive breeding, husbandry, veterinary and reintroduction practices in the existing breeding facility located in Taif. The committee will also help guide the design of a state-of-the-art breeding centre to be constructed in AlUla County and consult on habitat revitalisation projects in the Sharaan Nature Reserve.

It was announced in February that the newly created Global Fund for the Arabian Leopard will have an initial endowment of US$25 million, making it the largest fund in the world wholly dedicated to safeguarding the Arabian leopard. Currently in the strategic planning and operational set-up phase, the Global Fund will be fully mobilised by the end of 2019.

The announcement of the newborn leopard cubs also follows the signing in June of a partnership agreement between the RCU Governor His Highness Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Mohammad bin Farhan Al Saud and Dr. Thomas Kaplan, chairman of the global wild cat conservation organisation Panthera.

Saudi Arabia, through this partnership, has in turn joined the Global Alliance for Wild Cats, making a commitment to invest $US 20 million over the next 10 years.

**[Explore the media kit for more high quality images, video clips and information.](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/x8ohz5tca8524j4/AACvD6xL4UHUSpXBOPCV17OIa?dl=0)**

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**For any media enquiries please contact the RCU Public Relations team at: PublicRelations****@rcu.gov.sa**

**Notes to editors**

**About AlUla**

Located 1,100 km from Riyadh, in North-West Saudi Arabia, AlUla is a place of extraordinary natural and human heritage. The vast area, covering 22,561km², includes a lush oasis valley, towering sandstone mountains and ancient cultural heritage sites dating back thousands of years to when the Lihyan and Nabataean kingdoms reigned.

The most well-known and recognised site in AlUla is Hegra, Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site. A 52-hectare ancient city, Hegra was the principal southern city of the Nabataean Kingdom and is comprised of more than 100 well preserved tombs with elaborate facades cut out of the sandstone outcrops surrounding the walled urban settlement. Current research suggests Hegra was the most southern outpost of the Roman Empire after conquering the Nabataeans in 106 CE.

In addition to Hegra, AlUla is home to a series of fascinating historical and archaeological sites such as: Ancient Dadan, the capital of the Dadan and Lihyan Kingdoms, which is considered one of the most developed 1st-millennium BCE cities of the Arabian Peninsula; thousands of ancient rock art sites and inscriptions; and Hijaz Railway stations.

**About The Royal Commission for AlUla**

The Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) was established by royal decree in July 2017 to protect and safeguard AlUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in North-West Saudi Arabia. RCU is embarking on a long-term plan to develop and deliver a sensitive, sustainable transformation of the region, reaffirming it as one of the country's most important archaeological and cultural destinations and preparing it to welcome visitors from around the world. RCU’s development work in AlUla encompasses a broad range of initiatives across archaeology, tourism, culture, education and the arts, reflecting the ambitious commitment to cultivate tourism and leisure in Saudi Arabia, outlined in Vision 2030.

*The Sharaan Nature Reserve*

The 925-sq. km Sharaan Nature Reserve that is being developed by RCU is a key project in the RCU ALI portfolio and will become the future home for Arabian Leopards from the captive breeding programme, pending a widespread revitalisation programmed to combat the effects of overgrazing and desertification. Once the vegetation has bounced back, a healthy prey population will be established, ensuring the Arabian leopard is introduced to a sustainable ecosystem.