

## The Snow Leopard in Independent Kazakhstan

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In December, 1991, the number of countries in the world with populations of wild snow leopards increased by four as the USSR broke up into independent states. Where previously there was only the USSR, now the countries with wild snow leopards are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Kazakhstan, with an area of 2.7 million square kilometers (about 1 million square miles) is now the ninth largest state on earth and home to the snow leopard of the Tien Shan Mountains (southeastern and northeastern areas of the republic along the border with Kyrgyzstan, China, and Russia). The snow leopard remains in protected status under the government of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, but economic pressures and uncertainty over environmental legislation may present new threats to the snow leopards of the country.

The snow leopard has long been an important symbol for the Kazakh people and the more ancient civilizations of the region (see "Snow Leopards in Ancient Artwork"), and recently the capital, Almaty, adopted the animal as its symbol, placing the snow leopard on the city seal. Unfortunately, the zoo in Almaty only has one snow leopard now and is anxious to obtain a mate to renew a captive breeding program which had been underway successfully in the late 1980's. The costs of veterinary medicine, meat, and personnel wages have skyrocketed with the inflation that has affected the new state, and these difficulties are creating some real

challenges for the zoo administration, which has long been interested in environmental education and conservation of snow leopards (see Fall, 1988 *Snow Line*), as evidenced by the 1989 Sixth International Snow Leopard Symposium hosted by the government of Kazakhstan.

Currently, the snow leopard and its prey species, such as the wild sheep or arkhari (*Ovis ammon*) are protected in three major mountain reserves or *zapovedniki* of Kazakhstan: Aksu Dzhabaglyy (75,094 hectares in western Tien Shan Mountains); Almatinskiy (73,342 hectares in southeastern Kazakhstan); and Markakolskiy (71,367 hectares in northeast Kazakhstan). This author visited two of these reserves in the fall of 1993. Reserve science staff headed by Tektur Tuleushev, Vladimir Shakula, and Oleg Khomullo, reported that from 5 to 15 snow leopards are believed to live in each reserve, as evidenced by tracks and actual sightings in winter time.

Problems facing the government of Kazakhstan include the challenge of maintaining these reserves against economic pressures of domestic herd expansion, illegal poaching of prey species, illegal taking of snow leopard skins for foreign markets, and difficulties associated with newly "international" borders. Workers at the Aksu-Dzhabaglyy reserve, for example, noted that the reserve borders Kyrgyzstan, and dedication to area preservation may not be the same throughout all the republics of the former USSR nowadays. In addition, reserve workers are paid very low wages, and management is finding it difficult to keep the best-trained staff.

Despite these challenges, the government of Kazakhstan is considering plans to expand the areas under protected status. Plans include opening up three new reserves in alpine areas that are likely to include snow leopard populations (Dzhungarskiy, Tarbagataiskiy, and Alakolskiy, totaling 670,000 additional hectares). Protected areas are managed by the Ministry of Ecology and Bioresources of Kazakhstan, an agency which is also considering plans for creating new national parks in the country to promote and attract "ecotourism". One problem in realizing the 1991 scheme of enlarging protected areas is uncertainty over land use laws, land privatization, and rights for controlling regions after the devolution of the



Soviet system. Layers of approval have been added, from local collective farms and provincial governments to the Kazakh Cabinet of Ministers, Ministry of Finance, and parliament (especially for budget approval). Investment money for *zapovedniki* is scarce and issues of compensation for land withdrawn from other uses are undetermined as yet.

Another new wrinkle on environmental work in Kazakhstan is the increasing presence of multinational firms. such as Chevron, who are investing in development of oil in the Caspian Sea area. The government of Kazakhstan is pursuing a very aggressive policy to shift to a market system. as evidenced by the newly created U.S.-Kazakhstan Economic Development Council. Firms from the U.S., Europe, Korea, and Japan are all entering Kazakh markets and could present opportunities for partnership and socially responsible investing in environmental efforts.

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**Rese:rues:**

**Xi Aksu Dzhabagliy**

**X2 Alma At inskiy**

**X3 Ma:rakolskiy**

**Proposed:**

**X 4 A lako Iskiy**

**X5 Dzhunga:rskiy**

**X6 Ta:rbagataiskiy**

Unfortunately, Kazakhstan's geographic position right in the center of Asia is creating new negative pressures on endangered species. In the fall of 1993, the English language Kazakh newspaper reported on a controversy over visitors from the Persian Gulf region, who were accused of illegally

taking out falcons for sport hunting (*Kazakhstan*. No. 48. Dec. I, 1993). The border with China has become wide open, offering chances for illegal export of animal parts into Chinese markets for traditional medicines. And foreign hunting groups from Europe and the United States have found the independent states of this region to be a new opportunity for hunting big game animals.

Environmental education efforts in Kazakhstan are blossoming with independence. A new journal, the *EcoCourier*. has emerged to focus entirely on issues of nature (editorial offices Zhibek zholi St 15. office 609. Almaty 480002, Kazakhstan), schools are initiating courses on conservation for children. and the newly formed Kazakhstan Zoological Society is

headed by Professor Anatoli Kovshar of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, who has long been a supporter and friend to the International Snow Leopard Trust.

One question which has emerged for the government of Kazakhstan is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Under the Soviet government, the USSR signed and apparently adhered to this agreement, which protected snow leopards as well as other endangered fauna. The government of Kazakhstan and other republics of Central Asia are considering signing the convention as independent states, and should be encouraged to do so. The people of Kazakhstan are in a unique position to show the world their commitment to the beautiful symbol of their land found in their ancient artwork and petroglyphs: the snow leopard of the Tien Shan Mountains.