SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVATION IN KYRGYZSTAN:
ENFORCEMENT, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
ACTIVITIES BY THE GERMAN SOCIETY FOR
NATURE CONSERVATION (NABU)

Birga Dexel

Co-ordinator Snow Leopard Project, German Society for Nature Conservation – Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU), Invalidenstr. 112, 10115 Berlin, Germany; e-mail: birga.dexel@nabu.de

BACKGROUND

The German Society for Nature Conservation (NABU) has been actively involved in nature and species conservation in Kyrgyzstan since 1993. NABU has assisted the Kirghiz Ministry of Environment, Emergencies and Civil Defense, various national and local government agencies on the establishment of the Issyk-Kul Biosphere Reserve, endangered species conservation, ecotourism but also on renewable energy issues as well as alternative income opportunities for local people. The Issyk-Kul Biosphere Reserve in the north-east of the country covers 44,000 km², roughly the size of Switzerland, and incorporates important snow leopard habitat in its Tien Shan Mountain ranges.

In co-operation with the Kirghiz government and local experts, NABU spent one year in 1998 developing a national snow leopard conservation strategy with the primary aim of containing the poaching of snow leopards and its derivates. In January 1999, a unit of highly qualified enforcement personnel (Gruppa Bars) and support staff was hired to effectively protect snow leopards by attacking and undermining the illegal trade in its skins, bones and live animals. Gruppa Bars consists of five members employed by the Kirghiz Ministry of Environment, Emergencies and Civil Defense as part of their enforcement department. However, two of the group members are on loan by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs which has also established its own department for the NABU Snow Leopard Project. NABU and the Environment Ministry are full and equal partners in the endeavour, based upon a bi-lateral agreement of 1998 between the two organisations. A 10-year renewal of the agreement was signed in 2002.

The NABU-Kirghiz snow leopard project has also become part of the official deliberations between the Kirghiz Republic and Germany. The project is supported by the German Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Nuclear Safety (BMU) and the relevant Kirghiz Ministries. The project’s patron is his Excellency, Tschingis Aitmatov, the world-famous author and the Kirghiz Ambassador for the European Union and the Benelux States. The project was initiated with the help of Prof. Dr. Michael Succow, former German Deputy Environment Minister and winner of the Alternative Nobel Price.

LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES
BY GRUPPA BARS

The official duties of the special team Gruppa Bars are to halt the illegal trade in snow leopards and other endangered species through law enforcement measures including undercover operations, environmental education and research. The members of Gruppa Bars have established a country-wide network of informants, enabling them to act on precise information about wildlife crimes that have already been committed and crimes being planned.

The team members were carefully selected; they command the necessary experience and expert criminal knowledge for this highly risky task. The team is of half Kirghiz and Russian decent. Two of its members are police officers by training that have been freed from their duties in the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. They have long-standing experience in combating crime, including undercover operations. The other two members are experienced in the field – especially with snow leopards – and have the background of “rangers”. All four members have military experience. As a team, they combine all the skills needed to combat the trade in snow leopard parts and derivatives, and live animals. The members of Gruppa Bars are armed and granted a special government provision with far-reaching authority allowing them to arrest suspects and search them. They enforce the laws on protected species and testify in court. The regulation of hunting is unfortunately not in their jurisdiction, but rests with the Department of Forestry and Hunting.
ILLEGAL TRADE IN KYRGYZSTAN

Even though the trade in live snow leopards, pelts and bones poses a significant threat to the survival of the species, no comprehensive study of the nature, extend and implications of this trade has ever been undertaken on a global scale.

The use as well as the internal and cross-border trade in snow leopard pelts and live specimen has a long tradition in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan and its neighbouring country Kasachstan furs have traditionally been used for wall mounts or coats. The yurts of influential people in the region are decorated with furs mounted on the walls. They are also displayed during festive activities. During inauguration, President N. Nazarbayev appeared public in traditional Kazakh coat with the collar made of the snow leopard fur.

The furs and increasingly the bones of snow leopards are mainly sought after across the Kirghiz border in China’s autonomous Xingjiang province and in Russia. From the latter, they also make their way into the European Community via the eastern European countries such as Poland. There appears to be disturbing and growing evidence that the bones are increasingly being used as a substitute for tiger bones, a species which is also at the brink of extinction due to the demand for its bones used by a number of practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

In 1999–2002, the NABU Task Force dealt with 178 cases of wildlife offences and has confiscated three snow leopards, one golden eagle, one peregrine falcon, and two hawks alive. Fourteen snow leopard skins, two lynx skins, 65 marmot skins, 11 Marco Polo sheep trophies, 13 ibex, five golden eagles as well as many other freshly hunted wild animals were impounded. 110 poachers and traders were arrested, 162 arms confiscated and 232 traps, 119 snares and 79 snares specifically designed for snow leopards were destroyed.

The first snow leopard alive was confiscated by Gruppa Bars in December 2000. The female now named Dshamilja was offered to an informant in Bishkek for US $ 10,000. At the time of her confiscation, Dshamilja was only six month old and had been kept for two month in an extremely small cage in which she had to feed and leave her excrements (Figure 1). She had been poached according to the arrested traders in Tajikistan in the summer of 2000. One of her hind paws had been cut off by a snare during trapping; there is no information available on what happened to her mother and possible siblings. After her rescue from the hands of brutal illegal traders, Dshamilja stayed for ten days with one of her rescuers who became very attached to her. With the help and approval of the German and Kirghiz authorities as well as with the support of the International studbook keeper and EEP Co-ordinator for the species, Leif Blomqvist, Dshamilja was transported to Germany on December 23, 2000. There she was donated to the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP) and tentatively placed for recuperation in the Wildpark Lüneburger Heide in Nindorf. She soon became the subject of zoological curiosity since for the first time, a young wild-caught snow leopard was adopted by an adult pair. Dshamilja was in October 2001 transferred to Zürich Zoo where she and a male from Krakow hopefully will breed.

In April 2002, another two appr. 9 months old female snow leopards were confiscated from traders by Gruppa Bars inside the Issyk-Kul Biosphere Territory. The traders had kept on a metal chain in an old stable and had tried to sell them to one of NABU’s middlemen for a sum of 22,000 US $. The animals were confiscated and given to the rehabilitation center build by the Kirghiz non-governmental organisation Nabu Tien Shan. Both females were

Figure 1  A young female was confiscated by NABU in late 2000. The female “Dshamil” was later on transferred to Wildpark Luneburgerheide in Nindorf, Germany, to participate in the EEP-breeding programme in Europe.
mutilated by the traps in which they were caught in the Biosphere Reserve. One of the females has her complete front paw missing and the other one two of her toes also on the front paw.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

In addition to the very successful anti-poaching work, an educational component has been added to the project in 2000. NABU has long-standing experience in this field in both Germany and abroad and had led an environmental education campaign for the Biosphere territory in Kyrgyzstan. It was this campaign, conducted in 1997, which led NABU to revise the Western educational approach and to tailor it to the needs and wishes of the people in the region. In 1997 and 1998 a travelling exhibition designed by local environmentalists was shown in villages and cities in the region of the Biosphere Reserve Issyk-Kul which was at this point still in the making.

In the evaluation process it became clear that a different approach was needed to reach the local people in the mountain areas. A team of Kirghiz zoologists subsequently prepared a “Leo-Bus” for touring the remote villages during the winter months, seeking a direct exchange with local stakeholders on the issue of snow leopards and species conservation. In conjunction with the Kirghiz state television, a 60-minute film on snow leopards and NABU’s conservation efforts was produced. The film was subsequently shown twenty times on Kirghiz television and received the 1st price during the ecological film festival for Kyrgyzstan and the 2nd price on a Central Asian scale.

In each village or city visited by NABU’s education team Bars, two separate events are organised: one for adults and the other for school children. In schools, the members of the Bars team gives a lively presentation on and show slides and pictures of an animal all children have heard of, but very few have ever seen.

Many of the children have their own phantasies and stories of snow leopards, but factual information on any of the native species is not made available to them. The biological textbooks dealing with Kirghiz nature are very outdated if available at all. Before the film is shown, the Bars team explains in detail the role of the snow leopard in their ecosystem and why it is so important to protect them for the future. The children are encouraged by the Bars team to draw pictures, write poems or stories or to produce other handicrafts featuring snow leopards or other species. The children have produced stunning pictures and woodcarvings often depicting the killing of a snow leopard by poachers. A selection of the artworks will be exhibited in the capital of Bishkek.

The events for adults are held in the evenings. Every villager is invited to participate, tea and local products are offered and after a brief initial introduction, the film is shown. After the film a lively discussion often starts on the subject and the NABU team can directly answer questions, exchange views and collect valuable information on the status of snow leopards and local attitudes towards the species. In general, local people appeared to have very little knowledge on the precarious conservation status of snow leopards as well as on the laws covering endangered species, as well as on the existing penalties for wildlife crimes. They were, however, grateful for the Bars team for the effort to visit them in their village and provide them with information they would not receive otherwise. Snow leopards play an important role in the culture of the people and are viewed with far greater benevolence than wolves or lynx.

The winter months are the perfect time for educational activities since many of the villagers have returned from their mountain summer pastures to their homes in the villages. The winter is very long and during this time the men have less work than during other times of the year. Poaching is a males-only domain, whereas women were the culprits in four out of 14 cases of attempts to trade snow leopard skins. Snow leopard tracks are more easily detected in thick snow during winter and snow leopards follow their prey in lower altitudes closer to human settlements. From January to March the mating season begins and this is the time when they are most vulnerable. From November 2000 till March 2001, 52 educational events were organised in Bishkek as well as in the Chui and Issyk-Kul Provinces. More than 10,100 school children and 2,218 adults were reached and very valuable information gathered from local people. The educational campaign was continued in 2001–2002. Currently the Bars team has more requests for visits for the coming winter from villages than it can actually handle.

RESEARCH

Snow leopards are among the least studied big cat species in the world. Precise and comprehensive population data is not available for either Kyrgyzstan or the other Central Asian range countries. NABU has already conducted a number of small surveys in selected areas and will expand its survey efforts and research activities. In 2002, a contract was signed between NABU and the Kirghiz Ministry of Environment, Emergencies and Civil Defense for the establishment of a permanent research station in the northern part of the Issyk-Kul Reserve bordering the Chelek Valley in neighbouring Kasachstan. The area does offer good habitat for snow leopards and their prey species. In conjunction with German scientists, surveys and research activities will start in June 2002.

OUTLOOK

The future for snow leopards in Central Asia looks gloomy. Poaching and trade are the most significant threats to the species in the region. The geographical closeness to markets for skins, live specimen and increasingly bones in China combined with intensified official trade links between China and Kyrgyzstan makes enforcement the key task in the coming years.