

Introduction to the Proceedings (8th Snow Leopard Symp)

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It is fitting that the Eighth International Snow Leopard Symposium is being held in Pakistan. More than twenty years ago, naturalist George B. Schaller made the first color photographs of snow leopard in the wild, in Chitral Gol, then a hunting sanctuary of the ex-Mehtar of Chitral. In his subsequent National Geographic article, "Imperiled Phantom of Asian Peaks," Schaller wrote:

"Suddenly I saw the snow leopard. Wisps of cloud moved between us, and she became a ghost creature, appearing and disappearing as if in a dream. We were 120 feet apart on a rugged Pakistani cliff, neither of us moving - two beings bound to each other in a world of swirling snow. Thus, I glimpsed one of the rarest and least known of the world's great cats."

Soon after Schaller's encounter, snow leopards disappeared from Chitral Gol, not to be seen again for more than fifteen years. In 1990, six years after Chitral Gol had been declared a national park, a pair of cats appeared with two cubs, as if to magically reclaim their protected territory. And now, this magnificent creature has brought together, once again, professionals in snow leopard habitat management from all over Central Asia in the ongoing quest to learn more about snow leopard habits, distribution, and conservation.

Despite the good news of Chitral Gol, and despite the efforts of dedicated biologists, government officials and others, the snow leopard remains an endangered species. Indeed, populations have continued to decline, coming close to extirpation in the isolated mountain massifs of Inner Mongolia in China, and plummeting throughout newly declared Central Asian Republics. On the brighter side, populations are on the increase in Pakistan's Khunjerab National Park, Nepal's Annapurna Conservation Area, and southern Tibet's Qomolangma Nature Preserve.

The theme of this year's symposium, "Facilitating Cooperation for Snow Leopard and Biodiversity Conservation in Central Asia," is apt; for it embraces several key, linked elements to portray the snow leopard as a regional flagship for biodiversity. First, the snow leopard is highlighted as an international species, one whose vast range is concentrated along the world's most prominent mountains which serve as international boundaries between many of the twelve countries supporting wild snow leopard populations. Cooperation between governments, institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the general public is vital to securing the future of the snow leopard and its habitat - especially in these days of declining budgets, downsizing, and scarce human resources, yet mounting environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. Second, snow leopards require relatively large land areas for their survival, not to mention a plentiful supply of wild prey like blue sheep, ibex, markhor and marmot. Countries are often constrained in their ability to set aside large protected areas, so the linking of reserves internally and across borders is important in order to better ensure that viable populations of snow leopard and other large carnivores can persist in the future.

The snow leopard's incredible beauty and legendary elusiveness imbues this cat with the very qualities of a charismatic "mega-species" - an umbrella or flagship species for conserving the other rich biodiversity

that exists across the vast mountains and high valleys of Central Asia. Some even see the snow leopard as an indicator of the health of these ecosystems, thus emphasizing the need for information on its status, distribution, natural history, and interactions with humans.

People-wildlife conflict due to livestock predation by snow leopard and other predators remains a persistent issue, for animal husbandry is vital to the welfare of many mountain communities, and even the loss of a few animals may lead to significant hardship. Conservationists are faced with a fundamental dilemma: how to encourage local people to protect an animal that sometimes kills their valuable livestock? Any solution must be equitable to people as well as the environment, and relatively easy to implement. These questions are addressed by several contributors to the Eighth International Symposium, and the topic will no doubt continue to receive close attention in the future. It is also significant that this symposium is so well attended by representatives from the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, also attending the Special Session on Biodiversity in Central Asian Regions that follows this symposium.

The International Snow Leopard Trust and the World-Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan owe an incredible debt of gratitude to the small but dedicated group of professionals working to conserve Central Asia's unique flora and fauna and its particularly rich human culture and tradition. We hope that the snow leopard will be seen as a Wild Ambassador for the region's natural and human biodiversity for many decades to come.