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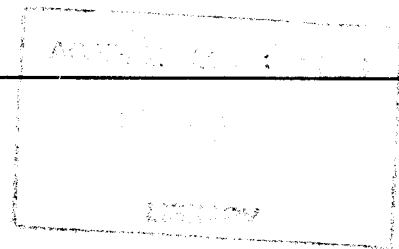
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The Snow Leopard in its Northeastern Range

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From April until June of 1995, I surveyed the central and eastern Sayan regions of Russia to determine the population of snow leopard within the northeastern part of its range in Asia. I was especially interested in looking at population cores along this marginal extent of range, and ecological corridors linking the groups.

The areas surveyed were: (1) Okinskiy and Kropotkinskiy Mountains of Eastern Sayan (2) Munku Sardyk Peak (3,492 metres) in the Bolshoi Sayan Mountains on the border between Russia and Mongolia (northwest Hovsogol) and (3) Tunkinskiy Mountains (central portion – the ridge between Altan-Mundarg at 3,157 metres and Shumakskiy Pass at 2,760 metres).

Snow leopard tracks were found in all three regions. Secondary evidence received through questionnaires also supports the idea that snow leopards here are not unique, but have continually lived here at least in recent years.

Kropotkinskiy and Okinskiy Mountains

In all, I recorded seven tracks in the Zhombolok River Basin: five to six were made by different animals, including two sets from female with young. Evidence of snow leopard has existed here since the 1960s. From 1975 to 1993 tracks were noted in Zhombolok by hunters every winter. In neighboring regions, snow leopard were observed in the Sentsa, Khoito-Oka, and Urda-Oka River basins. Most recently, a live animal was sighted in 1994.

Of known snow leopard prey, the ibex, red deer, roe deer, and reindeer are widespread here. The landscape of the region does not at all resemble that of Central Asia.

Munku-Sardyk Peak

I noted one track of snow leopard along the Belyi Irkut River. Another seven places where snow leopard had marked with scrapes were found along the divide between the Belyi Irkut and Muguvek Rivers. This was the only discovery of marking in the Central and Eastern Sayan region. Evidence of snow leopard here is not regular. This may be due to the fact that human hunting in the Munku-Sardyk area is sporadic. The largest population settlement nearby is the village of Mondy and no one there ever reported seeing a snow leopard. The only exception is evidence from the local hunter, Bimba Zabanov. His grandfather had told his father about sighting a snow leopard more than 100 years ago around Munku-Sardyk. More often I heard about tourist groups: they found snow leopard tracks once in 1993 (April), three times in 1994 (May) and twice in 1995 (May).

Known snow leopard prey here include mountain goat, red deer and musk deer. The landscape here resembles snow leopard habitat of Central Asia.

Tunkinskiy Ranffe

I noted three tracks, made by at least two separate animals along the upper reaches of the Ukhe-Ger and Shumak Rivers to the west and east of Shumakskiy Pass. Snow leopard tracks were noted

around Altan-Mundarg Mountain in 1981 and 1991 or 1992. Four of the cats were seen here together in 1994 (female, male and two young). The adults were killed.

Also in 1994, along the Ikhe-Ger River, four were seen: in one case the animal apparently was an adult and in the other case a female with two young. In this region, snow leopard prey includes mountain goat (the largest group occurs here), red deer and musk deer. The landscape here is also closer to that of Central Asia, but snow cover is much higher than in the Munku-Sardyk area.

The results of this work allowed the following generalizations:

1. The snow leopard in this region is more common than secondary evidence has suggested, but special research on the species has not been done here. Local hunters rarely visit snow leopard habitat in the winter and therefore are practically not acquainted with the animal's tracks, and poorly recognize even the live cat. They have claimed, for example, that they have seen "tigers" or "lynx with long tails" in the area.
2. Kropotkinskiy, Okinskiy, and Tunkinskiy Mountains seem to contain permanent population core groups totaling not less than 20 to 30 individuals. This is suggested by the continuity of evidence over time and the presence of breeding females.
3. Peak Munku-Sardyk apparently makes up a narrow ecological corridor linking the Tunkinskiy Mountains with Northwest Hovsogol in Mongolia.
4. The most northeastern point of permanent population within snow leopard range seems to be at present time the middle section of Tunkinskiy Mountains, especially the upper reaches of Shumak River (Kitoi River basin dividing Tunkinskiy and Kitoiskiy Ranges). Distribution of snow leopard and mountain goat to the east of Shumak River is apparently limited by deep snow cover. In terms of sign of animals, there has only been evidence of some mountain goat in this region.
5. It may be that the highest exchange of population is between the Kropotkinskiy, Okinskiy, and Udinskiy groups. Peak Topografiy (3,044 m.) seems to represent the separation between the southernmost groups in the Kropotkinskiy and Okinskiy Mountains. To the west and east of this peak, there are spatial constraints on population spread. Its role as an ecological corridor may not be great although snow leopard has been noted in various places along its western side.
6. Cases of poaching are well-known here, but its prevention is difficult, given a 70 per cent unemployment rate and continuous inflation in Okinskiy and Tunkinskiy regions.

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(Translation by Kathleen Braden, Seattle Pacific University)