

Notes on the status of captive snow leopards in regions of the former Soviet Union

Full Text:

First of all, I would like to greet you on behalf of the director and my colleagues at the Moscow Zoo on this occasion of the Seventh International Snow Leopard Symposium and wish you success toward our goal of preserving this very beautiful and unusual cat. I do not want to take much time, but will use this opportunity to tell you about the condition of snow leopard populations in zoos of the former USSR.

Despite the general political and economic situation, zoos of the region have preserved our friendships and business contacts.

Because I was able to cooperate with Leif Blomqvist, in terms of coordinating snow leopards in zoos of the USSR, I was able to attempt to influence the genetic health of the population, and today, there is not one case of interbreeding. At the present time, in the nine zoos of the region, we have 28 snow leopards (14/14). Twenty-two are mature, but in all only two breeding pairs - in Moscow and Tallinn; of pairs not yet breeding - Russian zoos have 5 pairs; Kazakhstan zoos, two pairs; Estonian zoo, one pair. The remaining animals are not in pairs, and this is the basic problem for us today. Currently, the Moscow Zoo needs two males; the Kazan Zoo needs to exchange a male (half brother); the zoos in Perm, Ekaterinburg, and Kaunas - three females, since they have three young males (born 1987 - 89). In addition, the pair in the Tallinn Zoo finished their breeding life (the male is especially old); in the Moscow Zoo we have two solitary adult females who have bred many times. This year, the remarkable male, Ramit (Dushanbe 5), died after living 15 years and producing 20 cubs from two females.

Earlier, snow leopards were rare, but we received them from central Asia (Kirgizia). Now, to get fresh blood is almost impossible. New administrations hinder sending animals to Russia, even though the local population attempts to use snow leopards to get hard currency from abroad. But we hope all the same that in the future, we may receive 1 - 2 animals from Kirgizia and a male from the Helsinki Zoo. The Moscow Zoo has conducted work widely in the exchange of animals and sends them out for breeding, even snow leopards. The zoos of western Europe obtain our animals by capture - their genetic tree is very short due to wild caught animals. Thus, in the population of snow leopards in western European zoos (and in the United States) there is new blood. Especially fortunate has been the breeding of the female "Orbit" in Basil Zoo and the males "Onyx" in Krefeld and "Orion" in Seattle.

However, we have a series of problems which require much work. By this, I mean permission documents from conservation organizations - the animals are losing time in the breeding season while they are being prepared.

In the past three years at Moscow Zoo work with snow leopards was very difficult due to the fact that animals were kept in very old cages because of initiation of construction on a large new pavilion for snow leopards and Pallas cats. This building will provide special breeding enclosures behind the exposition cages, where we can hold large animals in better conditions. We hope that construction, despite the difficulty, will be done at the end of this year and the Moscow snow leopards will go into their new large building and will continue to charm people by their beauty.

However, no matter how good the conditions for keeping them in captivity, it is more important to preserve this beauty in the wild. And of course, the most radical measures for conserving and increasing snow leopards in the territory of southern Siberia in Russia is to create new preserves, as requested by our researchers M.N. Smirnov and G.A. Sokolov in 1988; in their opinion an Eastern Sayan Reserve along the basin of the Oki River will play a key role in establishing protection of the snow leopard in Transbaykalia. Conditions in the reserve may permit reproductive behavior and could possibly allow continued production of offspring by animals in nature. This would be very good from the zoos' viewpoint, and there is already enthusiasm for this idea from the young researcher, Eugene Koshkarev, who made the study of this animal his life's work. But as he said in conversation with me, Mr. Don Hunter of Colorado has a very "profound dream" about this issue. People always hope for the best, and for this reason we are hoping that the dream becomes a reality with the help of the snow leopards' friends. And I invite you to visit our very old zoo in Moscow, gradually being restored, and see our beloved animals in their new home.