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## **Status and Conservation of Snow Leopard in Kazakstan**

### **Introduction**

The snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) is legally protected in the Republic of Kazakstan. formerly the USSR since 1972, and is listed in the Red Book of Kazakstan (1978), as well as Appendix 1 of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Fauna and Flora (CITES), which was signed by Kazakstan in 1993. Protection and law enforcement of rare animal species is the responsibility of the Ministry of Ecology and Bioresources.

### **Status and Distribution**

Snow leopards are to be found in the most extreme eastern, south-eastern and southern mountainous regions, including the Altai. Saur and Tarbagatai. Dzhungarian, Alatau. Northern and Western Tian-Shan ranges. Numbers are low in all areas, and over the last few years there has been a decline in the population in some locations. The snow leopard or irbis is the most rare in eastern Kazakstan in the ranges of Katunskie Belki, South Altai, Kurchumski, Sarymsakty, Saur and Tarbagatai. Here the total numbers probably do not exceed 10-15 individuals.

In the Dzhungarian Alatau there were 20-25 snow leopards according to information provided by B. Annenkov. but the current status is unclear for there are numerous reports of poaching by the shepherds and other people of the region. The primary snow leopard areas in the Tian-Shan range in Kazakstan are said to be Ugamsky, Talassky, Kirgizsky, Kungei. Zailisky-Alatau. Ketmen, and the Terskei. Despite the large land area encompassed by this region, the total number of snow leopards has been placed at 60-70 individuals, mostly found in the higher mountains of the north western section.

Thus, the total snow leopard population in Kazakstan is estimated at no more than 100-110 animals, including 20-25 in the central part of the Zailisky-Alatau. As indicated in the Proceedings of the 6th International Snow Leopard Symposium, Y. Grachev and A. Fedosenko placed the total population at 180 snow leopards.

### **Protected Areas**

Although there are nine protected areas in Kazakstan, snow leopards are only regularly reported from the Aksu-Dzhabagly and Almaty (formerly Alma-Atinsky) reserves. There are occasional reports from the Markakolsky Reserve which is located in the southern Altai or eastern part of Kazakstan. Thus, the main range of snow leopard in the Altai region is located outside of any protected area.

Snow leopard are also found in some *zakazniks* or partially protected nature reserves, which tend to be larger in size than the former state reserves. However, the level of protection is low, and accordingly, these areas cannot play a large role in the preservation of snow leopard in the Republic of Kazakstan. In this author's opinion, it was correct to transform some *zakazniki* or partial nature sanctuaries into formal reserves.

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reservation (*Zapovednik* or former hunting reserve) is located in western part of the Talassky Alatau (West Tian-Shan). It is the oldest and the first zapovednik in Central Asia, having been created in 1920, encompassing an area of 74400 hectares. It includes two

isolated areas of paleontological interest located some 120 km apart. While special research on snow leopard in the reserve has not been undertaken, the number of individuals is estimated at eight to twelve.

The Almaty Reservation (*Zapovednik*) is located in the highest parts of the Zailiisky Alatau range of the Northern Tien-Shan some 25 km from the large city of Almaty. It was created in 1931 and encompasses an area of 73.325 hectares with mountain peaks that exceed elevations of 4,500 meters. Snow leopard have been irregularly reported in the reserve since 1974, and according to data collected by V. Zhirjalov (Science Director of the Almaty Reserve), there are 3-4 pairs in the reserve. Ibex (*Capra [ibex] sibirica*), the main prey of the snow leopard, number 600-700 individuals, indicating a very high density for the species. The Almaty Reserve is considered to be the most important protected area for the species in Kazakstan, but its area is very small. Therefore the reserve's borders should be expanded and the area declared a national park as proposed some years ago.

### **Scientific Research**

Former studies of the rare and endangered animals in Kazakstan were undertaken by the Institution of Zoology (Academy of Science of Kazakstan) and the Laboratory of the Wild Animals' Protection and Problems, along with staff from the respective *zapovedniks* and university zoology departments. Research has been carried out on various prey species like the wild goats and sheep, and marmot, but special studies of snow leopard have not been undertaken in recent years due to the declining budgets allocated to the protection of nature and scientific research.

In creating the Snow Leopard Preservation Center, it is our intention to initiate a field research program aimed at "Tracking the Snow Leopard." Members of this club have carried out snow leopard research in various regions of the former USSR, and include the following investigators E. Koshkarev operating from Irtuusk, Russia; V. Shakula in the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve; A. Dzhanyspaev in the Almaty reserve; and Y. Zinchenko in the Ust-Kamenogorsk-Markakol Reserve.

### **Major Threats And Conservation Activities.**

The major threats to the species include: (1) Deliberate poaching with the aim of selling the valuable fur of the snow leopard; (2) Habitat loss resulting from the expansion of human activity in its mountain habitat, and (3) Deliberate or retaliatory killing by shepherds in response to predation upon livestock.

From March. 1993 the Irbis Club has conducted a project entitled "Snow Leopard should live," the objective of which is to draw the attention of the public and state leaders, through the mass media, to the problem of preserving the snow leopard. From November. 1995 this project has received small financial support (US\$3.147) from the ISAR and the U.S. Agency for International Development. In February of 1995, the club received computer equipment from Sacred Earth Network (SEN), thus enabling it to communicate via e-mail, and to better distribute editions of the bulletin "Irbis" as well as leaflets on the protection of snow leopard and other animals.

In the spring this year the Club "Irbis" prepared a proposal for establishing a Snow Leopard Preservation Center, which will concentrate on the following programs: (1) "Silver Wonder"- education of local people and publishing of materials; (2) "Tracking of Snow Leopard"- a field research programme, and (3) "Return to the Wild"- the creation of the breeding centre on snow leopard with purpose of reintroducing them to the wild.

Ministry of Ecology and Biorcsources is responsible for creating new protected areas for snow leopard

and other animals such including the Dzhungarian *zapovednik*, the Zailiiski National Park, and the Tarbagataiskii *zapovednik*, as well as proposals to expand existing reserves such as the Aksu-Dzhabagly, Markakolski and Almaty protected areas. Unfortunately, government does not have the financial or technical means to realize these projects.