

## Update: Mongolia

by Tom McCarthy

Change is the word I repeatedly apply when describing Mongolia today. Less than two years ago the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia's political mentor and principal trading partner, had yielded a dramatic impact on life in this central Asian country. When I first joined Dr. George Schaller in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, we encountered stores with empty shelves, airplanes grounded for lack of fuel, and a government struggling with the concepts of market economics and democracy. During the fall of 1992 as Schaller introduced me to the snow leopard research project I was soon to lead, we survived on a diet of mutton, cabbage, and rice- about the only food then available in the country. Recently, after my first full year of study, I was able to buy fresh vegetables, fruit (bananas!), and even Coca Cola. While George and I had witnessed initial small attempts at opening the decision making process to the people, recent mass demonstrations in the capital successfully called for a free media and further democratic reforms. Where the presence of just a few westerners was a novelty in 1992, Ulaanbaatar is now teeming with foreign consultants: and even remote areas are becoming tourist destinations.

Such rapid changes can have far reaching ramifications, not all beneficial. Unemployment is high, especially in the capital. Alcoholism is prevalent throughout the country. The promise of capitalism has not materialized for many people and the gap between the few wealthy and the many poor grows daily. With little industry, Mongolia will look more and more toward its natural resources to reduce trade debt. Examples can be seen on several levels. Snow leopard hides are routinely offered for sale on the street and even in the newspaper. In the past

two years, more than 30,000 gazelle have been taken in government-conducted hunts for local and foreign consumption. Oil and mineral exploration by foreign and joint-venture corporations is on the increase. It is not an atmosphere where conservation of wildlife and wild places takes a high priority.

For those of us in the country to help Mongolia preserve its unique natural heritage, the challenges

are many. Fortunately, there are concerned individuals in leadership roles, particularly within the Ministry of Nature and Environment (MNE), and the Mongolian Association for the Conservation of Nature and Environment (MACNE), the government agency and the NGO with which our snow leopard project is associated.

During the planning of our study, we agreed to provide a number of outputs identified as useful by our Mongolian counterparts. First we would study the ecology of the snow leopard in Mongolia. With the pioneering work of Rodney Jackson in Nepal as a model, we are addressing this component by the use of radio collars and intensive monitoring of cat activity. Where Jackson worked in what may be prime snow leopard habitat, our study sites are situated in less optimum range, on the barren peaks of the Altai mountains above the Great Gobi Desert. We hope this will result in an improved understanding of leopard habitat requirements and life strategies over a wider range of environments. Two leopards have been collared to date, one young 60-pound female and a prime age 90-pound male. Tracking the movements of even two cats is a lot of work and we hope to have several more collared soon. I quickly realized that I had taken the use of light aircraft for granted during my years of tracking bears, mountain goats, and caribou in Alaska: however, I also found that daily treading the terrain of the study animal gives a more complete understanding.

Secondly, to determine relative leopard abundance and identify areas of significant populations, we are conducting surveys of snow leopard range throughout Mongolia using the standardized techniques developed by ISLT. Most of our survey work this year was concentrated in the Trans-Gobi Altai in southwestern Mongolia. We are already finding that leopards are not evenly distributed in that range. It will take additional data before we can identify what environmental characteristics seem to offer the best habitat and support the greatest cat densities.

The final component of our work is training. Biologists and staff at the Gobi park and MACNE are taking part in class and field courses covering topics from basic ecology to advanced research techniques. We also hope to facilitate an ISLT

sponsored workshop next fall to introduce the SLIMS program to MACNE, MNE, and the Academy of Science biologists. Together, the results of these three components should help Mongolia design, establish, and administer a network of protected areas capable of supporting viable populations of snow leopards, their prey, and associated wildlife.

During this period of rapid change and hard economic times, it would be easy for Mongolia to make decisions that have deleterious and long-term impacts on wildlife. It is therefore critical that the best information possible be made available to the decision makers. Our project and several other programs by such entities as WWF (World Wildlife Fund), DANIDA(Demmark), and the United Nations Development Program are currently working to supply information as well as financial and technical assistance for conservation planning and implementation. It is indeed a critical time in history for Mongolia and its unique complex of wildlife. It is also a faSCinating and fulfilling time to be there as a biologist.