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THE CONSERVATION OF THE SNOW LEOPARD (Uncia uncia)  
IN AFGHANISTAN

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Summary

The snow leopard occurs in several widely scattered localities in north eastern Afghanistan. No information is available on its numbers, but 70 to 80 skins are estimated to pass through the bazaars of Kabul each year. The Afghan Government has created two sanctuaries where the species will be protected.

The snow leopard has been recorded from several widely scattered localities in Afghanistan but the remoteness of the areas concerned and the secretive nature of the animal make it difficult to arrive at an objective evaluation of its exact status and distribution. An indication that reasonable numbers still exist comes from the continuing trade in pelts. Rodenburg (1977), who carried out a survey of the trade in the skins of wild animals in Afghanistan, estimated that 70 to 80 snow leopard pelts pass through the Kabul bazaar each year. This trade is now illegal, but in 1979 I was still able to find 10 to 20 pelts offered clandestinely for sale at any one time. Visitors and expatriots residing in Afghanistan buy the pelts and smuggle them out of the country. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) makes their import into member countries illegal, but a lot of the skins recently exported from Afghanistan have gone to Italy which did not ratify the convention until October 1979. Most of the countries from which foreign visitors to Afghanistan originate have now ratified CITES and effective implementation of the provisions of the convention should decrease the demand for snow leopard

skins in Kabul. The traders usually claim that the skins originate from eastern Afghanistan in the forested mountains of Nuristan near the Pakistan border.

Recent records of snow leopards in Afghanistan are summarized by Habibi (1977). He himself saw two animals in the Moqoor Qara Jelga Valley near Zor Kol Lake (ca 73°40'E 37°27'N) in the big Pamir and one at Qazideh (probably ca 71°55'E 36°35'N) in the Wakhan corridor in 1974.



Picture 1. The Pamir mountains  
Photo: R. Petocz

He cites reliable records from near the town of Khundud (72°35'E 37°0'N) in the Wakhan in 1973 and the tundra zone of Zebak (71°50'E 36°25'N) in 1976. He also quotes reports from local people of its occurrence near the snow-line in Laghman and Nangahar provinces. Naumann (1973) gives observations from the Quie Chaqmaktin, Teger Qarom, and Berget Aye valleys in the small Pamir (ca 73°50'E 37°15'N). Although snow leopards almost certainly do occur in the western Hindu Kush, the only records are from local people in the Ajar Valley area (67°15'E 35°25'N), and these observations have never been properly substantiated. Therefore, a slight doubt exists concerning the western limits of its distribution.

Snow leopards occupy a wide range of habitats in Afghanistan. They have been recorded in the high alpine region of the Pamirs at altitudes of around 4500 m. (Habibi 1977) while Roberts (1977) cites records from the Chitral

area of Pakistan near the Afghan border where they have been seen in forested areas down to 1500 m. In the former habitat they were believed to prey upon Marco Polo sheep (Ovis ammon), ibex (Capra ibex), and domestic stock. In Pakistan the main prey species are markhor (Capra falconeri) ibex (Capra ibex), bharal (Pseudois nayaur), and domestic stock. This knowledge of the range of habitats that the animal occupies and the variety of prey species utilised would indicate that the potential range of the animal in Afghanistan would be quite considerable. Their numbers would be limited by the abundance of the mountain ungulates that constitute their main prey species. These are thought to have decreased considerably in the recent past as a result of an intensification of hunting and competition for pasture with domestic stock. In the absence of the larger prey species, it is probable that snow leopards could continue to subsist of the hares (Lepus capensis), marmots (Marmota caudata), pikas (Ochotana spp.), and gallinaceous birds that are still numerous in most mountainous areas.

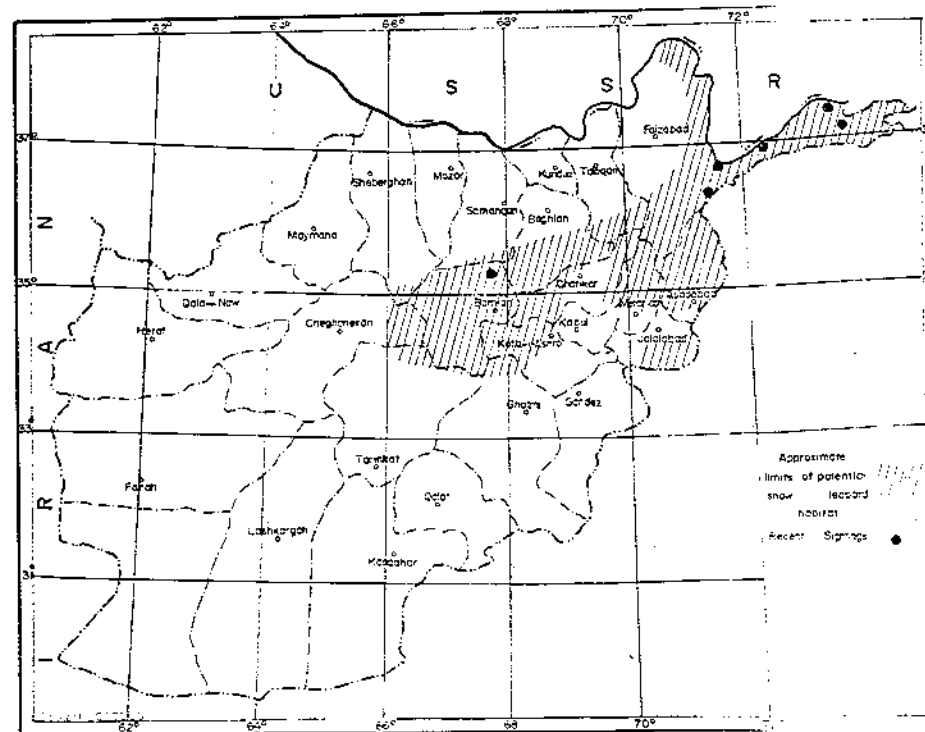


Fig. 1 The distribution of the Snow leopard in Afghanistan

On the basis of these considerations, I have shown in Figure 1 the extent of suitable snow leopard habitat in Afghanistan. It seems likely that the animal is still thinly distributed throughout this range away from the main population centres. The species is legally protected but it is almost impossible to enforce such laws in the remote and inaccessible areas concerned and snow leopards must be considered to be highly endangered, not only from illegal hunting, but also from the accelerating depletion of their major prey species caused by competition with ever increasing numbers of domestic stock.

The government of Afghanistan has a small but active wildlife conservation and national park department and work is now under way to create a series of parks and reserves to protect representative and outstanding ecological areas. So far six areas have been gazetted and of these two wildlife reserves are in areas where snow leopard occur.



Picture 2. The Ajar Valley Area  
photo: J. A. Sayer

The first of these areas is the Ajar Valley wildlife sanctuary. It has an area of about 50,000 hectares and is situated amidst spectacular mountain scenery in the central Hindu Kush. The area has a good population of ibex (Capra ibex) and smaller numbers of urial (Ovis orientalis) and Bactrian deer (Cervus elephas bactrianus). Snow leopard are occasionally reported by the local people (Shank, Petocz, and Habibi 1977) and a predator that killed seven Bactrian deer in the winter of 1972-73 was either this species or Panthera pardus.

The second area is the Pamir-i-Buzurg wildlife sanctuary in the Wakhan Corridor. The sanctuary has an area of 67,938 hectares and is famous for its Marco Polo sheep (Ovis ammon poli). 2,000 to 3,000 of these sheep occupy the sanctuary and its surroundings and they are thought to be a major prey species of the snow leopard. Petocz et. al (1978) report seeing a snow leopard stalking a nursery group of Marco Polo sheep but the animals moved out of sight before the episode was concluded. They also observed a snow leopard on the sheep rutting grounds in the winter of 1975 but the animal did not interact in any way with the sheep. Petocz (1978) mentions that the snow leopard in this area is considered particularly dangerous for domestic stock and that it is also hunted for its fur whenever the occasion arises.



Picture 3. The Ajar valley area  
Photo: J. A. Sayer

It is planned in the future to gazette another wildlife sanctuary in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Detailed surveys of the area have not yet been carried out but an important consideration in the final delineation of the sanctuary will be to choose an area with good populations of mountain ungulates, especially markhor (Capra falconeri). It is therefore very probable that snow leopard will also occur.

The wildlife conservation legislation of Afghanistan is at present being revised and strengthened; the country will probably ratify the CITES Convention in the near future. Greater efforts will then be made to control the illegal trade in skins. In the long term, however, the greatest threat to the survival of a snow leopard in the wild comes from the increasing pressures on its prey and habitat from the growing human population and their domestic animals. This is why it is vitally important for Afghanistan to give effective protection to its wildlife sanctuaries and to ensure that the latter are sufficiently large to protect the ecosystems upon which the snow leopard depends.

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