

2008 International Conference on Range-wide Conservation Planning for Snow Leopards: Saving the Species Across its Range

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Over 100 snow leopard experts, enthusiasts, and government officials gathered in the outskirts of Beijing, China from March 7–11, 2008 for the first-ever International Conference on Range-wide Conservation Planning for Snow Leopards. Conference organizers included Panthera, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Snow Leopard Trust (SLT), Snow Leopard Network (SLN), and the Chinese Institute of Zoology.

Snow leopards are found in 12 countries of Central Asia in some of the harshest and hardest to reach places on earth. There are thought to be between 4,500 and 7,350 snow leopards inhabiting some 1,853,000 km² of potential habitat (McCarthy & Chapron 2003). These estimates are based on an important basic biological requirement of snow leopards: mountain ranges. Using this principle, potential range maps for snow leopards were created in 1997 (Jackson & Hunter 1997) and validated with historical data in 2006 (Williams 2006). Despite these efforts to define potential snow leopard range, there is an enormous lack of information about snow leopard status in most areas where they are found.

Range-wide conservation planning is an attempt to close that gap. In bringing together experts from 11 of the 12 range countries, the 2008 conference was able to map specific and local knowledge about snow leopard range and determine Snow Leopard Conservation Units, areas which are the most important for conserving snow leopards over the long-term. The process highlighted areas where knowledge of snow leopard status is strong and where it is lacking, and resulting maps will provide biologists and conservationists with a more strategic approach to snow leopard conservation and research.

After two days of intense mapping, the conference provided a venue for

some of the world's leading researchers to share expertise on snow leopard conservation and research methods. The participants were warmly welcomed by the hosts, the Chinese Institute of Zoology and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Keynote speeches by Dr. George Schaller, one of the first people to study the elusive snow leopard in the late 1970s, and Dr. Urs Breitenmoser, co-Chair of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, outlined the biggest challenge facing snow leopard conservation: working with local communities on long term conservation plans for the entire ecosystem. Dr. Tom Kaplan, Founder and Executive Chairman of Panthera, also spoke of defining specific outcomes for conservation action and offered Panthera's partnership and collaboration, backed by substantial resources, to all participants.

Presentations were then given on current best practices in community based conservation initiatives, including handicraft programs, small-scale ecotourism, livestock husbandry improvements, trophy hunting, and conservation education initiatives. Management issues such as law enforcement, landscape level planning, and transboundary protected areas were discussed. A variety of cutting edge research and monitoring techniques were then reviewed, including occupancy models, camera trapping, genetic techniques, scat detection dogs, GPS telemetry, and prey monitoring. Country teams also reported on the status of snow leopard action plans across the region.

In a highly participatory approach, the range-state government officials and conservationists and researchers were then charged with using the new range maps and Snow Leopard Conservation Units to develop country specific actions that should be undertaken in the next several years if snow leopards are to be conserved over the long term. Each country's plan was designed with the following shared vision in mind:



Tom Kaplan, Chairman of Panthera, with Aleksandr Vereshagin from Kyrgyzstan (Photo J. Brannon).

A Vision for Snow Leopards over the next century

A world where snow leopards and their wild prey thrive in healthy mountain ecosystems across all major ecological settings of their entire range, and where snow leopards are revered as unique ecological, economic, aesthetic and spiritual assets.

The major ecological settings were defined as: Altai-Sayan, Trans-Altai – Alashan Gobi, Tian Shan, Pamir, Hindu-Kush, Karakorum, Himalayas, Hengduan Mountains, and Tibetan Plateau. The entire range is defined by the potential range analysis conducted in a workshop during this conference.

Finally, the conference participants developed a set of resolutions on long-term conservation of snow leopards.



Rodney Jackson, George Schaller, Joe Fox, and Dawa Tsering discuss the status of snow leopards in Tibet (Photo E. Sanderson).

To accomplish this goal each range country must:

- Expedite development of a Snow Leopard Action Plan, or implement existing plans to the fullest extent.
- Designate a national snow leopard representative to coordinate with the

Snow Leopard Network for the exchange of information at the national and international level.

- Range state governments will develop mechanisms to promote trans-boundary cooperation on matters such as trade, research and manage-

ment relevant to snow leopard conservation.

A full report, inclusive of all country-specific actions and the new range map, will soon be available from the co-organizers and will also be found on the Snow Leopard Network website: www.snowleopardnetwork.org

References

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