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**Status and Conservation of Snow Leopards in Afganastan
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Introduction

Known locally by the Dari name of Palang-i-Barfi, the snow leopard inhabits the northeastern and central portions of the Hindu Kush range as well as the Pamir valleys. Some have been spotted in Laghman, Nuristan and Badakhshan, and in central Afghanistan they are found in the Ajar Valley Reserve. The snow leopard is considered endangered and its numbers are declining due to poaching for the skin trade, lawlessness and lack of an effective government in the country.

This cat has a coat with thick, soft, long guard-hairs and a very dense and woolly under-fur. The coloration is smoky grayish with a light yellowish tinge, especially on the flanks, paling to pure white on the under-parts. The markings form a pattern of large, somewhat blurred rosettes among which small, compact spots can be seen. The under-parts have occasionally a few black blotches. The markings are bright and conspicuous in young individuals but tend to fade and become diffuse with age. The rosettes are more pronounced in the summer than in the winter coat. Newly-born cubs are darker than adults. The tail is very well-furred and thick and marked with rosettes forming a pattern of transverse rings. In the past, its beautiful fur has attracted a thriving fur-trade in Afghanistan.

Distribution and Status

In Afghanistan the snow leopard inhabits the northeastern and central portions of the Hindu Kush range, as well as the high Pamir valleys, between elevations of 3,000-5,000 m. in alpine valleys and meadows, coniferous forests, and in the tree and scrub zone (Sayer 1980). As the name implies, the species occupies snow-covered mountains, but in winters it descends to lower elevations for feeding.

Two animals have been seen in Moqor Qara Jelga Valley near Zor Kol Lake in the Big Pamir sector in 1974 and near Qazideh in the Wakhan Corridor. In 1973, Petocz (1974 pers. comm.) saw one animal crossing the road near the town of Khundud in the Wakhan Corridor. Snow leopards have also been observed near Qole Chaqmaktin, Teger Qorom and the Berget Aya valleys of the Small Pamir (Naumann and Niethammer 1973, Sayer 1980). Local people report that it occurs near the snowline in Laghman and Nuristan. In the southern part of Badakhshan the snow leopard is reported from the tundra zone of Zebak (Ashor Beg 1976 pers. comm.). In the central parts of Afghanistan they are found in the Ajar Valley Reserve (Abdul Haq 1975 pers. comm.), although Sayer (1980) felt these sightings had not been well substantiated. The latter author provides a map indicating snow leopard distribution in Afghanistan.

Snow Leopard Distribution in Afghanistan

Listed as an endangered species, the snow leopard is rare and certainly its numbers are declining due to the high monetary value of its fur and the still wide-spread fur trade in Afghanistan. It is still regularly hunted because of the lack of any ban against hunting, and the absence

of an effective and functional central government in the country. However, accurate up-to-date information on the current distribution and status of the species is lacking.

Threats and Conservation Actions

Snow leopards and their large prey species such as Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis ammon polii*), ibex (*Capra [ibex] sirbirica*), and markhor (*C. falconeri*) have been heavily hunted in many parts of their range, especially during the protracted war of the 1980's and early 1990's. Other important prey species include hares, pikas, marmots and game birds. Lately there has been an increase in the number of fires and general habitat destruction which has caused the disappearance of many species of wildlife in present day Afghanistan.

In the past, a ban had been imposed on the hunting of snow leopards, but even so an estimated 50-80 animals were shot annually for export prior to the implementation of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (Rodenburg 1977). Most of the skins used to be exported to the European (especially Italy) or North American market. The war never stopped the fur-trade business in Afghanistan, which reportedly continues to the present day. Based on a survey of shops and prices listed by Rodenburg (1977), this author suggests an income of over 150,000,000 Afghanis (US \$4,500,000) from the sale of wild animal furs in 1977 in Afghanistan. Rodenburg noted that between 3,000 to 4,000 professional hunters operated in the country and that about 25,000 people were directly involved in the smuggling of furs to Pakistan and overseas.

As with other species, only complete skins are offered for sale. Additionally, two hats and two pairs of gloves made from badly damaged skins have been documented. Altogether 25 snow leopard skins have been seen being sold to foreigners. A few skins of snow leopards and similar animals have appeared in fur shops in Kabul. Especially remarkable were the skins of some juvenile specimens, not more than a few months old, which were seen in one shop. Data from two sources lead to an estimated annual production of 50-80 skins before the war. Information about the main purchasing centers is not available.

The management of wildlife before the war was minimal, mainly imposed as the declaration of wildlife sanctuaries for royal hunting. This form of protection was somewhat effective against indiscriminate hunting within the designated areas. Reserves established in the late 1970's as part of an UNDP/FAO supported programme include the 50,000 hectare Ajar Valley wildlife sanctuary and the 67,938 hectare Pamir-i-Buzurg wildlife sanctuary in the Wakhan Corridor (Sayer 1980).

Overall, with a few exceptions such as hunting Marco Polo sheep, there were no regulations against hunting wildlife or altering their habitats. The proposed designation of some wetlands as waterfowl sanctuaries under the World Heritage Convention during 1979 never materialized due to the war. The increased fire-power during the war coupled with a widespread food and fuel shortage, and the people's need for money, as well as social displacements in a lawless land, placed a very heavy toll on wildlife and their habitats.

Conclusions

Now that the war has ended, and in the interests of rehabilitation, care will have to be taken to enforce measures that restrict hunting, especially during the breeding season. Areas which the snow leopard inhabits should be preserved through formulating special strategies, including the creation of protected areas and community conservation stewardship. Accurate surveys of current snow leopard populations and their habitats are essential as a foundation for building a national snow leopard protection and management policy for Afghanistan. The country can benefit a great deal from sound management of its wildlife to earn the hard currency this war-ravaged country needs to finance rehabilitation and reconstruction costs.