

Central Asian Republic Snow Leopard Specialists Plan Joint Conservation Strategy

Full Text:

Snow leopard specialists in Central Asia have agreed to collaborate in an action plan to save the snow leopard in the region. Participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and USA gathered in Aksu-Jabagly to discuss preparation of a regional program for protection of the snow leopard in the mountains of Central Asia.

A regional (international) working group called "Asia - Irbis" (*irbis* is the local name of the snow leopard) was established to carry out the following actions:

- create a regional computer database;
- carry out a joint survey on current status;
- work out and implement standard methods for censuses, monitoring and treatment of data;
- work out a regional strategy for conservation of the species and its habitat; and preparation and analyses of projects on Snow Leopard protection and monitoring;
- make proposals for the optimization of the protected areas network in Central Asia;
- organize a special training workshop, joint expeditions and meetings of specialists;
- ensure the wide distribution of information on the activities of the working group to promote public awareness.

Participants at the workshop prepared an Appeal to the Governments of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan and Uzbekistan Republics and Russia to provide urgent measures for snow leopard protection and to promote the initiative of the regional working group to save the species.

Elena Kreuzberg-Mukhina, Elena Bikova, Alexander Esipov of the Uzbekistan Zoological Society said in a report on the workshop that large-scale development of mountain territories in this century had led to declining ranges and numbers of many mountain species. Poaching and habitat transformation were the main causes which caused the extinction of the snow leopard in one region and the decrease in its number in others. They said the present status of the snow leopard in Central Asia gave rise to alarm about its survival in the current difficult socio-economic conditions.

Although the species is included in the Red Data Books of all Central Asian countries and Russia, and any legal persecution of Snow Leopard is strictly forbidden in all countries, the real threats to its survival increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Borders became more open; traders from China and other countries of South-East Asia were sending orders for snow leopard parts (bones, skin, and internal organs) used in traditional Chinese medicine. Old forgotten customs in the mountain areas had been reborn. For example, in ancient times snow leopard skins were presented as tribute to dominant Kyrgyz and Kazakh tribal rulers. Now the custom has appeared again and subordinates give the skins of snow leopard to the local chiefs of regional administrations.

The report said that there were insufficient funds for forest managers to carry out their work and salaries of wardens were so small that many of them became the executors of orders and guides of poachers. Poaching has increased in many areas, and the price of snow leopard skins fluctuates from US\$100 to \$2-3,000 depending on quality and the level of the transaction. Other causes of snow leopard decline reflect the decrease in prey numbers.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of livestock belonging to collective-farmers in many mountain regions has fallen sharply. This has led to the improvement of natural pastures in high altitude meadows and a growing number of some mountain ungulates and marmots. But, as a result of the decrease in livestock numbers, poaching of wild animals has increased, and many local villagers hunt marmots, ibex and wild sheep for food. These actions have led to halving the number of snow leopards, from about 2,000 at the end of the 1970s to about 1,000 animals or fewer, with negative current trends.

In several republics projects for conservation of the snow leopard and other wildlife exist - WWF in the Altai mountains of Russia; German Association for the Protection of Nature (NABU) for establishment of special anti-poaching squads in Kyrgystan; and International Snow Leopard Trust for the analysis of the present status of the snow leopard and its prey in Gyssar nature reserve in Uzbekistan.