

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVATION

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During this symposium, a great deal of new research and information has been discussed about the ecological requirements of the snow leopard, its behavioral traits, the status of wild prey species, and the long range plans for its survival. All of this is vital information for wildlife managers in parks and zoos, and for teachers around the world.

But what is the best way to get this information to the managers, the teachers, and the local people who can use it? And once they receive it, how can they be motivated to use the information to help conserve the snow leopard and its habitat? To insure that the data remains relevant, how can a dialog of information among the villagers, researchers and institutions be facilitated? For the teachers, how can they teach the information effectively so that the children and adults use the information in their own lives? Unless there are clear answers to these questions, snow leopard conservation will largely be left up to chance.

Nine years ago in Rwanda, a similar dilemma was being faced. Poaching of mountain gorillas was prevalent, and habitat loss threatened the few remaining individuals. However, at the same time a massive educational campaign and media blitz began, which increased the awareness of the nation about the plight of the mountain gorilla and its need for habitat and protection from poachers. Posters lined the streets, children studied the mountain gorilla in schools, and villagers began to value the mountain gorilla economically, as tourists came to Rwanda to view this massive primate. The result has been impressive—during the past two years not one mountain gorilla has been poached in Rwanda. Although part of this reduction can be attributed to increased patrols in the parks, previous use of anti-poaching units without the implementation of educational programs could not completely eliminate the poaching.

Perhaps an equivalent effort could be made on behalf of the snow leopard. For example, television and radio stations could carry educational documentaries as well as dramas based on real and mythological snow leopard encounters. Interactive games and books for children could be integrated into the mandatory curriculum of schools.

However, the snow leopard shares its habitat with a great diversity of people, representing eight countries, nine cultures and speaking a minimum of fifteen dialects. Add to that the variety of individual and cultural learning styles, and conservation education for the snow leopard can seem formidable.

In all of these nations, there is the basic tenet that there is a place for both humans and animals in the high altitude environment; and snow leopards, in particular, are considered a national treasure. An educational program designed to reinforce these positive attitudes and contribute to the awareness and appreciation of snow leopards is a first step. Later, programs need to be developed which relate snow

leopard data to the specific traditions, values, perceptions and multiple needs of the local people. This information would be gathered from the villagers themselves, contributing personal knowledge of their local environment and social conditions. Only through this active dialog of all participants can relevant educational programs be developed which offer realistic alternatives of action.

The slide program, "The Snow Leopard: A Vanishing Vision." represents a first step in this process. It offers recent information from researchers studying the snow leopard in the field and in captive breeding programs. It integrates the snow leopard into the complex mountain ecosystem of wild prey, soil, climate, plants and man. The program can be ordered from the International Snow Leopard Trust for a basic charge to cover slide reproduction and mailing. It includes a narrated tape for use in English-speaking schools, zoos and teacher training programs; or the written script can be used as a basis to translate the information into the local dialect of a region. Also included with the program is a fact sheet and suggested activities and games for children.

To be a successful, conservation needs to be considered important not only by the scientists and wildlife managers but also by the public. Educational programming is one way to enhance this understanding.