

Status and Conservation of Snow Leopard in Uzbekistan

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In conformity with the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan titled "On Protection of Nature" of 29 January 1993, the snow leopard is considered a specially-protected animal and is in the Red Data Book of both Uzbekistan and the World Conservation Union or IUCN. However, at a practical level, protection of snow leopards and enforcement of nature protection laws in their habitat is extremely weak. Under Uzbekistan's Law of Especially-Protected Natural Territories (dated 7 May 1993), only a few protected areas have been established for this species. Since its range is considerably larger, the country's protected areas cannot maintain a stable level of numbers of snow leopard (Koshkarev 1989).

The Gissarsky Nature Reserve, with an area of 87,538 ha, is the largest protected area in Uzbekistan. It is situated in the Kashkadarya region along the western slope of the Gissar Range in the Pamir-Altai mountain system. This reserve was established in 1975 by linking the Kyzylsuysky and Mirakinsky Nature Reserves, and adding two adjoining territories to them. Currently, this reserve consists of four distinct areas, Kyzylsuysky, Mirakinsky, Tanhazdaryinsky, and Gilansky, each of which is inhabited by snow leopards. Until recently, the number of this species in the Gissarsky Nature Reserve was as low as 10 individuals (Aramov 1982, Abdunazarov et al. 1990, Kamelin 1990). Aramov (1982) provides an assessment of snow leopard numbers on the basis of yearly censuses, including one conducted in 1994, as numbering 13-17 individuals. This is perhaps the highest count, since in the past few years ibex numbers decreased following an initial increase in population size.

The Chatkal Nature Reserve is located in the region of Tashkent region, and it occupies an area of some 35,200 ha along the western slope of the Chatkal Ridge of the Tien-Shan mountain range. This reserve also consists of two sites (Bashkzylsai and Maidantal) which are isolated from one another by a 15 kilometer-long strip of land. Snow leopards are encountered most often in Maidantal, which is located higher in the mountains and is also the more remote of the two areas. From 1975 to 1980, the reserve staff observed snow leopard and its tracks 11 times, five of which occurred during 1976. Most encounters were recorded in the Tashkensken, Kaltakol, and Karazay areas. Perhaps there are no resident snow leopards in these areas, except for individuals moving in from the adjusting areas.

The Zaaminsky Nature Reserve is located in the Dzhizak region and occupies 15,600 ha along the northwestern slope of the Turkestan Ridge in the Pamir-Alai mountain system. It had a common border with the Uzbeksy National Park (32,400 ha), but this protected area has been removed from the list apparently. Ishunin (1961) recorded visits of snow leopard to Zaaminskiy reserve from Tadjikistan, and despite a lack of up-to-date information, such visits to the reserve from the adjacent country of Tadjikistan are still quite possible.

Hence, there are two isolated snow leopard populations in Uzbekistan, both of which are located along the fringe of the species' distribution. These groups are the Pamir-Alai and the Tien-Shan, both of which are united to snow leopard range in neighboring Tadjikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Apart from animals inhabiting the Gissar Nature

Reserve, the Pamir-Alai population consists of animals inhabiting the upper portion of the Tupalang River basin and the mountains around Baisuntau. This population is currently estimated at about 30 individuals, from which as many as 10 individuals are reported to be killed or captured annually (Volozhennikov et al. 1985, Taryannikov 1986). However, these figures are probably exaggerated; we suspect the loss rate is more like five to eight individuals, with the entire Pamir-Alai group in Uzbekistan numbering 22 - 25 animals.

The Tien-Shan snow leopard sub-population group of Uzbekistan occupies the high-mountain portions of practically all of the large ridges in the area, including Chatkal, Pskem, Ugam and Talass Alatau. This animal is sometimes observed in the vicinity of the Oigang meteorological station, the Bolshoi Chimgan (Greater Chimgan), and in the Akbulak River basin. These appear to be visiting animals from Kyrgyzstan, but resident individuals can also be encountered there (Aripdzhanov and Esipov 1990). Once we recorded a female with three young. The number of snow leopards in this area is not high, as it is quite densely populated by humans and intensively grazed in comparison to Pamir-Alai locations. The number of ibexes is low, and the decrease in the number of the major prey species is attributable to poaching and sarcoptosis epizootics of sarcoptosis. The number of snow leopards harvested from this sub-population appears to be five or seven individuals, with the total number placed at 27-32 individuals. However, Pokrovsky (1976) estimates the population size at ten animals.

The major factors restricting snow leopard numbers in Uzbekistan appears to be poaching of both snow leopard and its large prey species like ibex, as well as disturbance associated with the intensive development of the alpine lands for pasturing livestock. In order to preserve the snow leopard in Uzbekistan it will be necessary to control and eliminate poaching. Additional habitat could be provided by expanding the Chatkal Nature Reserve by adding lands in the Shavassai River basin (which had been previously withdrawn from the reserve to allow mineral prospecting) as well as Akbulak River basin.

The range and numbers of snow leopard will continue to decline if no action is taken and the present situation continues. Currently, the 2nd edition of the Red- Data Book is being prepared in which snow leopard will be listed in the 2nd category of animals as "a rare animal species which due to the decreasing number and diminishing habitat may become extinct."