

Project Snow Leopard: a multinational program spearheaded by the International Snow Leopard Trust

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It is with a great deal of pleasure that we are able to announce at this, the Seventh International Snow Leopard Symposium, the launching of a collaborative program in conservation. The program is called Project Snow Leopard; Conservation of Central Asian Biodiversity.

At the symposium held in India in 1986 a "Project Snow Leopard" plan was announced by the Indian government. It was aimed at conserving snow leopards in India's northern States; it has been an excellent incentive. But now it is time to forge a multinational program, a program which, using the snow leopard as its focus, supports conservation in highaltitude ecosystems across the species' range.

The Project is built around the snow leopard because it can be considered an indicator species, a barometer of the quality of a natural ecosystem. It is uniquely suited to serve as a symbol or "conservation ambassador", able to cross borders and bring together diverse countries in programs of international importance to conservation. The species has captivated humans around the globe. It has the appeal necessary to serve as a shining focus for its mountain ecosystem. The International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT), as an apolitical, nongovernmental organization, is an effective channel for the Project.

The purpose of Project Snow Leopard (PSL) is to put in place an effective and decentralized system for defining and executing programs which conserve the endangered snow leopard and its habitat. The Project provides direct support to Central Asian high altitude reserves.

Mountain reserves are often isolated with great differences between them in topography, cultures and administration. Therefore, the institutional framework of Project Snow Leopard is designed so that the program can be tailored to specific regions and managed with a high degree of local involvement. There is good reason for this: evidence supports that the local watershed community is the best manager of its resources.

The Project is carried out through the implementation of three key components: the Nature Reserve Program, Environmental Awareness and Community Action, and International Symposia. The following is a brief synopsis of each of these components, an outline of the primary threats to the snow leopard and its habitat, and a listing of the specific conservation benefits which the Project will bring.

PRIMARY THREATS TO THE SNOW LEOPARD AND ITS HABITAT

The snow leopard, one of the rarest cats in the world, is considered highly endangered in every country where it is found. There are no reliable estimates for the total snow leopard population. There may be as few as 1,500 individuals or as many as 6,000, a high, optimistic number. What we do know is that the cat's habitat is shrinking and becoming increasingly fragmented.

Snow leopards inhabit the colossal mountain ranges of Central Asia. This is an area of steep slopes and fragile plant cover, extremely susceptible to environmental degradation. It is also a region of explosive development and humans are taking an everincreasing toll on the future of the snow leopard. Farmers clear more marginal land for farming and graziers move ever larger herds of livestock onto the alpine pastures, pushing out the snow leopard's principal prey species, the wild sheep and goats. The cat turns to domestic sheep or goat, and retribution is swift and deadly.

Poaching for the snow leopard's luxurious pelt has long been a major threat. Even though most countries are parties to the international ban on trade in endangered species, a fulllength coat, made from 6 to 10 skins, can still fetch upward of \$60,000. Even to the poacher, at the bottom end of the business, \$50 is a fortune. Now a new, more lucrative trade, is emerging. Snow leopards are being killed so that their bones can be sold for Chinese medicines. Skins are recognizable and dealing in them is risky. But bones can only be distinguished by experts, making this an insidious and difficult trade to curtail.

Even less visible threats are occurring. Due to atmospheric distribution of persistent pesticides their use unregulated in the Himalayas chemical and biological changes are occurring even at high altitudes. Other activities that directly or indirectly affect snow leopards and their reserves include road building, mining and military exercises. The snow leopard serves as a barometer for the health of the entire ecosystem; a downward spiral in its population may indicate wider environmental problems.

In view of the threats listed above it is obvious that without a coordinated information system to monitor what is happening to reserves and a cooperative framework from which recommendations can be made, mountain biodiversity will continue to decline. First to disappear will be the large mammals and

they will be followed soon after by other less spectacular but equally critical life forms. While endangered means there is still time, Project Snow Leopard establishes a program that keeps time from running out.

SPECIFIC CONSERVATION BENEFITS TO SNOW LEOPARD FROM THE PROJECT

Project Snow Leopard (PSL) will benefit snow leopard conservation through measures which address biodiversity, directly and indirectly. These measures:

- * Involve the local people in all stages of the Project
- * Improve management of mountain reserves in six snow leopard countries
- * Strengthen six local conservation institutions through training and program support
- * Reduce poaching of snow leopard pelts and bones by providing technical support to a minimum of 12 reserves
- * Promote regional cooperation in conservation in six countries
- * Identify and begin establishment of one new major transboundary park through the Project's cooperative multinational network

PSL strengthens conservation -- Conservation/education materials on the ecology of the snow leopard and its habitat will be developed for distribution to the villages and schools in the reserve areas. Local language versions will include Urdu, Mongolian, Chinese and Hindi. Audio visual materials, as well as written information, will be developed because officials in these regions tell us that video is an effective tool for bringing conservation messages to isolated villages. Local staff will be trained for presenting the programs at selected sites in Central Asia.

PSL improves reserve management -- Snow leopards occur in reserves across twelve countries in Central Asia. The vast majority of these reserves have no management plan and currently do not have the trained staff to develop such a plan. However, effective management of reserves, and the protection of their ecosystems, hinges upon access to reliable baseline information. For most of the reserves this information does not exist. The Project trains local people to use a standardized method for data collection so they can better monitor their reserve, learn from other regions, and share the knowledge. Through training and the placement of incountry database stations, the capability of each participating local natural resource institution is strengthened. Regional cooperation is promoted because the network goes beyond individual reserves and unites reserves in countries across the snow leopard range.

PSL addresses livestock depredation -- Extension services which improve animal husbandry practices will be offered to those within or near snow leopard reserves. Emphasis is on increasing productivity of the existing livestock population without increasing livestock numbers. Depredation "hotspots" will be identified and recommendations made on how to reduce people/wildlife conflicts. Incentives will be offered to reward local people who protect their domestic stock from predation.

PSL reduces trade in pelts and other body parts -- The international fur trade is declining but snow leopard pelts still fetch 50 to 100 US dollars to the local hunter or middleman. The most significant threat, however, is from the Asian medicinal market because it places high value on the bones of the larger cats. The project will assist local reserve staffs to halt poaching by providing field equipment and training. Public awareness will be enhanced through the continuing forum of international symposia, bulletins for the media, and articles in journals and government reports.

PSL promotes the establishment of transboundary parks -- By its very structure, the network established by Project Snow Leopard facilitates international cooperation. Standardization of data enables comparison between reserves and provides for intercountry assessments. This makes possible informed decisions on which parks could be extended to national borders, thereby creating regions adequate in size to sustain relatively large snow leopard populations (50 to 100 or more) by connecting parks already in existence.

PSL identifies corridors which link reserves -- Since few existing protected areas are large enough to maintain genetically viable populations, it is necessary to link snow leopard reserves so that movement and dispersal of individual animals is possible. Creation of corridors is more cost-effective and more easily accomplished than the enlargement of an established reserve or the creation of a new park. PSL will supply the information needed to determine the best locations for such access corridors. Priority will go to collaborative programs which promote carefully planned multiple landuses and limit disturbance to sensitive areas.

WHY PROJECT SNOW LEOPARD WORKS

The Project is carried out through the implementation of three key components:

The Nature Reserve Program -- Many reserves in Central Asia lack reliable baseline information, in some cases even such basic data as species' lists or the actual reserve boundaries. Most reserves do not have management plans or the trained staff to develop them, yet effective ecosystem protection and management depends upon the availability of such information. The Nature Reserve Program of PSL provides training, technical assistance and material support to Central Asian reserves. It promotes the use of a standardized methodology for assessing reserve quality. Through this technology transfer, natural resource institutions are strengthened and are able to make better informed landuse decisions. The cooperation enabled through PSL provides a more meaningful picture across the range and makes it easier to establish new reserves at or near borders where they will be most effective.

Workshops offer a forum for reserve staff and decision makers to get together and tackle difficult problems. At the workshops local reserve personnel learn to collect data according to a standardized set of methods so that 1) information can be useful across the entire 12-country range; 2) data and knowledge can be shared from reserve to reserve; and 3) individual reserves can make better informed local decisions. ISLT is developing a conservation manual, geared to each country, as the focal teaching tool of the workshops. In cooperation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Snow Leopard Trust has developed a computer program to store the data from each reserve.

The Snow Leopard Trust and the branch of the PSL network in each country sign an agreement that they will: 1) maintain the database system, 2) share data, and 3) further develop the information base, thus creating the evolving network among the snow leopard countries. This assures that the Nature Reserve Program will continue to improve as each new country branch becomes involved.

Environmental Awareness and Community Action -- This component of PSL includes: 1) identification of local partners/NGO's to help implement conservation programs, 2) selection of participating villages in areas surrounding reserves, 3) development of economic incentives in cooperation with government agencies and village leaders, i.e., improved water supply in exchange for anti-poaching patrols, 4) development and dissemination of education materials to schools and villages, and 5) monitoring the effectiveness of the village conservation programs.

International Symposia -- It has been said that a conference is but a gathering of individuals who alone can do nothing and together confirm that nothing can be done. This has not been true of the snow leopard symposia. To illustrate: The first symposium was held in Helsinki in 1978. Discussions focused on how to improve captive management. This emphasis continued over the next three symposia and there were positive results. Zoos began to have a higher rate of success in breeding snow leopards, more cubs survived, and as the captive snow leopard populations became self-sustaining, the need for taking animals from the wild was eliminated.

At the symposia in 1986, 1989 and the most recent in July 1992 in China, emphasis was shifted to the conservation of the snow leopard in its natural habitat. At this, the China conference, presentations address how the status of the snow leopard relates to the needs of people, other wildlife and mountain reserves.

Therefore, this Symposium is an ideal time to launch Project Snow Leopard because the program benefits not only the magnificent snow leopard but also, because of its focus on nature reserves, it assists a

wide spectrum of plants and animals in high altitude habitats. Project Snow Leopard gives time and hope to mountain species.