

Snow leopard

Full Text:

Conservation Status: Snow leopards are listed as Endangered in the 1996 IUCN List of Threatened Animals and by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and are banned as an Appendix I species under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

Estimates of the wild population are difficult to compile because of the remoteness of the snow leopard's range but most scientists agree that 4,500 to 7,500 animals remain in the wild. The largest populations are in China, which comprises about 60% of the potential range, followed by Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia. There are over 600 (check) snow leopards in zoos worldwide. Although protected in most countries within its range, snow leopards are still killed opportunistically in many areas, often out of retribution by livestock herders who are increasingly losing their stock -- presumably because of a declining natural prey base.

Status surveys for the snow leopard are relatively extensive compared to other species, and the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT) maintains a database of field reports and local population estimates. The Trust has also organized a protocol for standardizing field survey techniques known as SLIMS (Snow Leopard Information Management System) with tailored software that can be used by computer novices. ISLT has held training workshops in China, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Bhutan with a forthcoming workshop in Nepal. To date, four symposia have been convened in central Asian range states, expanding our understanding of the snow leopard's status, biology and distribution.

Description: Considered by many to be one of the most beautiful cats, the snow leopard or ounce, has a very soft and heavily spotted coat that is typically gray or yellowish gray marked with large dark gray, mostly open rosettes. Further adaptations for high-altitude life include long hair with dense, woolly underfur, an enlarged nasal cavity, shortened limbs (snow leopards stand only two feet tall at the shoulder) and well-developed chest muscles for climbing. The long tail is thought to aid in balance and additionally, and they often wrap their tails around themselves when resting for added warmth. Snow leopards weigh 60 to 100 pounds.

Range: Snow leopards have a large but extremely patchy and fragmented distribution consisting of a mix of long narrow mountain systems and islands of montane habitat scattered throughout a vast region surrounded by central Asian deserts and plateaus. Overall, snow leopards range from central Russia, Mongolia, western China and Tibet, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Krgyzstan, and the Himalayan portions of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal. Although the overall range extends nearly 3 million km² across central Asia, the occupied habitat is estimated at only 1.6 million km², mostly in Tibet and the adjoining other parts of China.

Habitat: Through most of their range, snow leopards are associated with steep rocky slopes with arid and semi-arid shrubland, grassland or steppe vegetation. In the mountains of Russia and parts of the Tien Shan, they visit open coniferous forest along the edge of the snow line but generally avoid dense forest. Snow leopards are generally found at elevations of 3,000 to 4,500 meters but occasionally go above 5,500 meters in the Himalayas. They occur as low as 900 m in parts of Russia and Mongolia.

Diet: Snow leopards are opportunistic predators capable of killing prey up to three times their own weight. During summer months, 45 percent of the diet of populations in China's Qinghai Province consists of marmots. At other times, the most commonly taken prey are wild sheep and goats (including blue sheep, markhor, ibex and argali) as well as deer, gazelle, young yak, wild ass and domestic livestock. Adult snow leopards kill a large prey animal every 10 to 15 days, and remain on the kill for an average of 3 to 4 days. Domestic predation averaged 2 percent per village in portions of Tibet but in other "hot spots", reaches as high as 9.5 percent of their diet. In areas around national parks of Nepal, remains of domestic livestock have been found in 7.8 percent of their scat during summer months and up to 39 percent during winter, a change probably related to the hibernation of marmots.

Social Organization: Snow leopards are solitary cats, coming together only to breed. Females become mature at three years of age, and after a gestation of 98 to 104 days, bear two to three young every other year. The young become independent after 18 to 22 months, although sibling groups may remain together briefly following independence. Males maintain a well-marked home-range that may overlap extensively

with those of several female snow leopards. In captivity, snow leopards may exceed 20 years of age but in nature, few are likely to reach 12 years.

Threats to Survival: For many years the snow leopard has been hunted for its beautiful thick coat. Depletion of its natural prey by hunting or overgrazing forces them to increase their feeding on domestic animals. Large-scale pika and marmot poisoning has also impacted the food base on the Tibetan Plateau. Most recently, the demand for snow leopard bone as a substitute for tiger bone in traditional Chinese medicine has added a new threat to this species. In 1994, traders paid as much as \$190 for snow leopard skeletons in Tibet, and people also trade sheep for bones along the border with Tibet. Although no longer traded in international commerce for their skins, fur coats made from snow leopards are still occasionally seen for sale in shops in Kathmandu, Nepal, Kashi, Xinjiang Province (China) and Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. **Please check with Dan Wharton I do not have the latest SSP or studbook.**

Zoo Programs - SSP: In 1999, there were over 600(?) snow leopards in zoos worldwide. The AZA/SSP for this species was begun in 1984 and strives to maintain a population of 250-300 animals in ___ managed locations within North America. In order to maintain a stable captive population, recommended breeding has produced an average of 25 cubs each year, an objective that has been enhanced by a declining incidence of neonatal mortality, especially by first-time mothers. As part of a zoo-based research program, the first cub conceived by artificial insemination has moved the SSP closer to genome banking.

Conservation: The Snow Leopard SSP works closely with the International Snow Leopard Trust, a tax-exempt non-profit organization dedicated to conserving snow leopards, their prey and habitat through a balanced program which meets the needs of the local people and the environment. *In-situ* conservation programs are implemented through ISLT's in-country Snow Leopard Conservationists (SLC) in China, India, Mongolia and Pakistan, who focus on alleviating people-wildlife conflict due to livestock depredation, improving management of protected areas, offering local communities with incentives and building local capacity. Through its Natural Partnerships Program, local persons will be recruited to serve as SLCs in other countries as funds become available.

The Seventh International Snow Leopard Symposium was held in Xining, China, in 1992; the 8th International Symposium was held in Pakistan in 1995. Each symposium has generated new interest in snow leopard conservation in the host nation, while also highlighting information gaps.

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Wild Status

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