



## **SNOW LEOPARD AND ITS PROTECTION IN UZBEKISTAN**

*by*

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Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia Shreber*) is a threatened species near extinction, it is included in the last IUCN Red Data List (2000) as Endangered. In the second edition of Red Data Book of Uzbekistan its status was defined as Vulnerable. However the current situation with populations of this species in Uzbekistan is unclear and needs in the special survey. The western border of distribution (range) lies through the mountain systems of Western Tien Shan and Pamiro-Alai in Uzbekistan, therefore its number here is very limited. On the different assessments the number of Snow Leopard in Uzbekistan now determined in 20-50 individuals. In 1998 in Central Asia there was established the new NGO directed to the protection of Snow Leopard within its range in the mountains of Central Asia. It was called “Asia-Irbis”. “Irbis” or “Ilvirs” is a local name of Snow Leopard in several central Asian countries. “Asia-Irbis” included specialists and amateurs of wildlife from 3 Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and Russia. Later Tajikistan team joins to this initiative group. “Asia-Irbis” worked out the action plan for the protection of Snow Leopard within range of its distribution in former Soviet Union and implemented several conservation projects with support of SEN – Sacred Earth Network – and ISLT – International Snow Leopard Trust. Both these organizations are known in our region by active position in the matters of wildlife protection and help in the development of environmental NGO-s.

In 1999 Uzbekistan team implemented the project on the preliminary assessment of the Snow Leopard and its preys populations in Gissar nature reserve (Pamiro-Alai) with support of International Snow Leopard Trust. Within the stage of report preparation authors had chosen several primary aims, including development of public awareness program in the region of snow leopard distribution and at total in republic. This project has the big political value, because it attracted the public attention to the problem of Snow Leopard protection and to the problem of biological diversity protection in the high mountain ecosystems. Successful implementation of first project initiated the development of other activity for the support to Gissar nature reserve. Last years there was created the initiative group “Gissar” united the rangers and workers of Gissar nature reserve and local inhabitants sympathetic to the problems of wildlife protection. “The Sacred Earth Network” helped in the development of project on the enforcement of infrastructure of nature reserve, within framework of new developed project there were bought computer and modem that allowed for the group to be included in the network of computer communication system. NGO “Ecopolis” from Tashkent helped to “Gissar” initiative group to buy the new equipment for the conducting of field

works and initiated participation of this group in the program “Periphery” directed to the support of local NGO-s located in the removal regions. There were established the good relations between NGO-s and official structures responsible for the protection and management of wildlife.

In 2000 Uzbek team of “Asia-Irbis” with support of “Sacred Earth Network” implemented the education project “Propagation of Snow Leopard and biodiversity protection in high mountain ecosystems of Uzbekistan”. During realization of this project there were prepared the illustrative materials for national university, state agencies and Gissar nature reserve. Also there were written the methodical guides for students, teachers and school children and environmental thematic phrasebook on Uzbek, Tajik, Russian and English languages for the work with local people in the remote mountain regions.

In 2001 Uzbek and Tajik teams of “Asia-Irbis” implemented joint project “Popularization of the Snow Leopard protection and collecting of inquest information about current status of this species in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan”. Main goal of this project was popularization of idea of snow leopard protection and biodiversity conservation within vulnerable mountain ecosystems in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as a collecting of primary data on the current status of the species and its preys in both republics. During implementation of project there were published and distributed the special methodic book about snow leopard, the special leaflet and questionnaires. All these work has been done on several languages – Russian, Uzbek and Tajik for distribution within local people living near protected areas or within habitats of snow leopard in the mountain regions. Also there were collected the inquest data among inhabitants of mountain regions and shepherds in Gissare and Chatkal nature reserves, Ugam-Chatkal national park of Uzbekistan, and within Tajik national park in Tajikistan.

In the result of all these projects implementation there were received the additional data about current status of Snow Leopard within protected and en-protected areas in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. These data allowed us to conclude that limiting number of Snow Leopard inhabiting mostly within protected areas, but density and number of populations are unknown. Local people in both republics mostly benevolent to the snow leopard, but in cases when snow leopards try to kill the livestock, local shepherds also pursue these animals. In Uzbekistan, the divided populations of Snow Leopard still exist within two mountain systems – Western Tien Shan and Pamiro-Alai. In Chatkal nature reserve and Ugam-Chatkal national park this animal can be found only along the state boundary within the watersheds of mountain ranges, in the regions difficult to access now, therefore the assessment of this population is not available now. In Gissar nature reserve the number of snow leopard is relatively stable and determined by biological productivity of mountain ecosystems. However, last year the situation in the frontier regions of Uzbekistan changed very much. Many boundary regions now are completely closed for the visits and protected by military frontier forces. On one hand, in such situation the protection of mountain regions and their wildlife enforced now, but on other hand, the soldiers can use their firearms against objects of wildlife, especially for the shooting of big mammals like ibex and snow leopard and marmots. And it can reflect the negative impact to wildlife; therefore it is necessary to enforce the public awareness work among military forces in the frontier regions.