

# The Community driven approach offers protection for the snow leopard from the IWT

## Background

The 'ghost of the mountain', as the enigmatic and elusive snow leopard is known, ekes out an existence in some of the harshest environments on earth, ranging across vast tracts of the remote and rocky mountain habitats of Central Asia.

However, it is not the only species at the top of the food chain struggling to survive in these fragile, high mountain ecosystems.

People also live precarious lives in this challenging part of the world, sharing and competing for the region's sparse resources with native species, including snow leopards. These isolated and scattered communities live an almost subsistence existence, often relying exclusively upon livestock for food and income generation as there are few other options available.

For the snow leopard, livestock provide a source of food, and increasingly so as populations of its natural prey – wild goats, Argali and other wild sheep, and ibex – are being depleted as habitat is lost to livestock that overgraze the vegetation leaving little for these wild mountain ungulates, and from unsustainable hunting for meat by locals and illegal trophy hunting. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of provisions for legal hunting by local people, which disenfranchises them and makes compliance with laws minimal [1].

Naturally, a hungry snow leopard will turn to livestock to survive.

When a snow leopard kills livestock the results can be catastrophic for the herders whose entire livelihoods depend on their herd. It comes as no surprise that livestock farmers are hostile toward the snow leopard and retaliatory killings are common. It has been estimated that up to half of all snow leopard deaths are a consequence of human-wildlife conflict.

The remains of snow leopards killed by locals are often funnelled into the IWT and serve to offset the economic loss of losing livestock to snow leopards.

Live snow leopards and their body parts, especially the skin and fur, are highly coveted, and are valuable commodities in the IWT. This is despite the fact that hunting and trading of snow leopards is prohibited both internationally (e.g. listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)) and in every country where it is found. Killing and trading of snow leopards persists and demand is increasing. It has been estimated that 221 - 450 snow leopards

are killed for the IWT annually [2]. These figures are likely to underestimate the true extent of poaching, as it is notoriously difficult to gather information on illegal wildlife trade, as it is an extremely secretive black market enterprise.

Poachers and herders acting in retaliation for or to prevent livestock losses largely supply the illegal trade in snow leopards.

Over the last 20 years the population of snow leopards has decreased by 20%. Today there may be as few as 3,920 or as many as 8,000 adult snow leopards remaining in the wild, and the population continues to decline [3].

If the current rate of poaching continues, the snow leopard's very existence will be jeopardised. If 450 animals are poached annually, in addition to animals killed but not traded, it is feasible that one or two decades this animal will be extinct in the wild, or restricted to areas where people do not live – i.e. very small populations restricted to marginal habitat.

The current situation doesn't bode well for the future of the snow leopard.

#### What can be done?

Efforts are being made to introduce and enforce laws to protect the animal, as well as tackle the demand for snow leopards, however, without communities' willingness to adhere to these laws and protect this species, they are unlikely to succeed.

Community involvement is the key for the long-term survival of the snow leopard and other threatened species in the region. Local communities are in the best position to protect the snow leopard; they just haven't had the incentives (or disincentives) to do so and react accordingly to their current situation.

However, there are projects' trying to redress this. In 2010, Panthera and its partners, including local communities, initiated a project ('Providing IWT Alternatives in Snow Leopard Range') in Tajikistan to abate human-snow leopard conflict. In 2014 this project was extended to include the Kyrgyz Republic - these countries have some of the highest rates of killing snow leopards for trade <sup>1</sup>.

#### How is this initiative achieving this?

The initiative specifically seeks to address the motivation for communities' involvement with poaching and the IWT. The central tenet of the project is that without community support and engagement, the poaching problem will not be resolved.

In these countries, much of the conflict with, and poaching of, snow leopards and their prey stems from lack of access by local communities to their natural resources. The initiative has clearly demonstrated that when local communities are permitted and equipped to manage their own resources, they become empowered and motivated to conserve them. In the case of the snow leopard's natural prey, such as the ibex, the prospect of sustainable harvesting through trophy or subsistence hunting has provided an added incentive to conserve snow leopards.

In five newly formed community-based conservancies, trophy hunting of wild ungulates and nature tourism has proven to be a powerful incentive for local communities to conserve the snow leopard and their prey.

This initiative **strengthened disincentives for illegal behaviour** by employing local people as rangers (with additional financial bonuses based on performance) as well as giving a percentage of the fines incurred by poachers (many of whom subsequently become rangers themselves – an alternative livelihood) back to the rangers, and half of the proceeds from hunting fund the salaries of the anti-poaching and rangers salaries.

Other **options for alternative livelihoods** created by the initiative include: investment of proceeds from hunts in developing and maintaining microfinance programs; and training women (Tajikistan) to become tourist and hunting guides (in anticipation of niche tourism in women hiking in Tajikistan), and rangers.

Money from legal hunting has also benefited communities more broadly, including developing and maintaining healthcare facilities, schools (e.g. purchase of books), water infrastructure, flour & coal and the construction of homes for homeless families.

**Measures to decrease the costs of living alongside snow leopards** are also employed. Specifically the building of predator-proof livestock corrals, which protects livestock from snow leopard attacks, eliminating household food insecurity and economic vulnerability incurred on livestock, and ultimately eliminating retaliatory killings and reducing contact with snow leopards and thus their availability for the IWT.

### Is it working?

The initiative is having positive results. Poaching is decreasing in Tajikistan and in two of the conservancies in the Kyrgyz Republic and – with support from an international hunting organization – the hunting outfitter conducting illegal trophy hunts is almost out of business. With fewer cats being killed, fewer animals are entering the IWT.

Incidents of retaliatory killing in 12 villages across the Pamirs where conflict had been severe have been reduced to zero following construction of predator-proof corrals.

Furthermore, alternative livelihoods are also benefiting local people in numerous ways and importantly, provides increased economic security for these communities in the long-term.

Any measurable impact on the populations of snow leopards in these areas will take longer as they are a slow reproducing species and their secretive nature makes them difficult to survey. However, populations of mountain ungulates - the snow leopards preferred prey – are increasing giving snow leopards greater opportunities prey upon wild animals (as opposed to livestock) and return to previously prey-depleted areas. For example, there was a 50% increase in ungulate populations within one year of protection via ranger monitoring in the Tajik conservancies and an increase from six to 10 snow leopards

after three years in one conservancy. Once prey populations rebound, snow leopards are more likely to follow suit.

Engaging communities in conservation not only benefits species at risk, but also addresses broader sustainable development issues, essential for the communities in the region.

Further details of this project can be found here:

[www.peoplenotpoaching.org//communities-shield-snow-leopards-poaching-and-iwt-tajikistan-and-kyrgyz-republic](http://www.peoplenotpoaching.org//communities-shield-snow-leopards-poaching-and-iwt-tajikistan-and-kyrgyz-republic).

### Links:

Countries: Tajikistan; Kyrgyz Republic;

Species: Snow Leopard; Argali; Siberian Ibex; Saker Falcon; Saiga Antelope

Strategies: Strengthening disincentives for illegal behaviour; Paid in money community scouts; Performance-based payments/incentives for patrolling or guarding; Un-paid (voluntary) community scouts; Raising community awareness about wildlife crime penalties and sanctions; Increasing incentives for wildlife stewardship; Tourism; Trophy hunting; Subsistence resource access/use; Decreasing the costs of living with wildlife; Preventative measures to deter wildlife; Increasing livelihoods that are not related to wildlife; (Non-wildlife based) enterprise development/support; Provision of community-level benefits.

### Sources and Resources:

[1] McCarthy, T. M. and G. Chapron. 2003. Snow Leopard Survival Strategy. ISLT and SLN, Seattle, USA. <http://www.snowleopardnetwork.org/sln/SLSSpage.php>.

[2] Nowell, K., Li, J., Paltsyn, M. and Sharma, R.K. 2016. An Ounce of Prevention: Snow Leopard Crime Revisited. TRAFFIC, Cambridge, UK. <https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/an-ounce-of-prevention/>.

[3] McCarthy, T., Mallon, D., Jackson, R., Zahler, P. & McCarthy, K. 2017. *Panthera uncia*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2017: e.T22732A50664030 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2017-2.RLTS.T22732A50664030.en>. Downloaded on 14 July 2018.

Link to Panthera Snow Leopard Program website

[<https://www.panthera.org/snow-leopards-conservation-country>]