



OVERVIEW

AHM

2017

# SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

CONSERVATION AND ADAPTATION IN ASIA'S HIGH  
MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITIES PROJECT



**TRAFFIC**  
the wildlife trade monitoring network

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PHOTO : Sanjog Rai / WWF Nepal

## **WWF Asia High Mountains Project: Snow Leopard Conservation Highlights from Bhutan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Pakistan.**

*PHOTO CAPTION: Yalung is the fourth snow leopard collared in Nepal's Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. Her collar is providing new insights into transboundary snow leopard movements in the high Himalaya.*

## GLOBAL

Since 2012, the WWF Asia High Mountains (AHM) Project has been providing support to the 12-nation Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program (GSLEP) to achieve the GSLEP goal of securing 20 snow leopard landscapes by 2020. This support has included both technical and logistical support for holding GSLEP events and trainings as well as support for the writing of climate smart snow leopard landscape management plans for GSLEP priority landscapes. The first two GSLEP snow leopard landscape management plans have now been developed, with AHM support, and two high level international forums have been held, with participation from all 12 snow leopard range countries.

WWF AHM supported the research and writing of TRAFFIC's "An Ounce of Prevention: Snow Leopard Crime Revisited," a landmark report that compiles and analyzes snow leopard crime data collected from across the snow leopard's range for the period from 2003-2016. This report is educating the global community on the extent of snow leopard crime, and is a milestone in the fight against the trade in snow leopards and their parts.

## FINDINGS

**4** SNOW LEOPARDS  
are poached every  
week, on average.

**55%**  
of snow leopards are  
killed in retaliation for  
attacks on livestock.

More than  
**150**  
snow leopards are  
illegally traded each year

**90%**  
of the reported snow  
leopard poaching  
occurred in five of the  
twelve range countries.

Data from the  
TRAFFIC report has  
been used in various  
campaigns to raise  
awareness of and  
support for the  
snow leopard.

## A LASTING IMPACT

With this report revealing unexpectedly high snow leopard crime, it is influencing the global conversation on snow leopard crime, helping all partners in their work to mobilize support for the snow leopard.

Release of the report was covered by over 60 prominent news outlets, increasing visibility for the snow leopard and highlighting the urgent need to protect them.

Data from the TRAFFIC report has been used in various campaigns to raise awareness of and support for snow leopard conservation.

The volume of crime documented in the TRAFFIC report and the percentage of retaliatory killing found will be used by GSLEP as a baseline for snow leopard trade monitoring.



PHOTO: WWF

*The snow leopard's home in Asia's high mountains forms the headwaters of Asia's most important rivers that are the economic lifeblood for nearly one-third of humanity. However, this region is highly vulnerable to climate change impacts.*

PHOTO :WWF





PHOTO: WWF

RANGER TENZIN

## TENZIN SAYS



“We were really excited to get photographs of snow leopards from WCNP. We showed these to community members living in the park and they were happy because the photos validated their conservation work.”

## TENZIN'S STORY

Bhutan's pristine mountains are an important home to the charismatic snow leopard. However, Tenzin, the Head of Research in Wangchuck Centennial National Park (WCNP), had yet to see evidence of one in the park until WCNP's first ever population survey of snow leopards was conducted as part of the WWF Asia High Mountains Project supported by USAID.

In the 19 years he has been working in conservation, Tenzin says that WCNP's first ever snow leopard population survey was his most challenging project, but also the most satisfying.

The survey counted a total of 14 snow leopards in the area, and provided the WCNP team with confidence that they could independently conduct Bhutan's subsequent national snow leopard survey. Tenzin went on to work as a key member of Bhutan's first national snow leopard survey which covered the entire northern arc of Bhutan.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- First snow leopard population survey of Wangchuck Centennial National Park that estimated a population of 15 snow leopards in the park
- First image of a Pallas' cat from Bhutan as well as images of common leopards in high altitude areas indicating how they have moved into snow leopard habitat, possibly due to **climate change**.
- **First** Snow Leopard Conservation Committees established in Bhutan, with 60 members in two committees who support anti-poaching patrols, wildlife monitoring, and awareness-raising activities in the park.

## A LASTING IMPACT

The WCNP snow leopard population survey trained park staff on systematic wildlife survey methodologies, and these trained park staff members went on to lead the work on the first ever national snow leopard population survey for Bhutan.

With support from the AHM Project, the first Snow Leopard Conservation Committees in Bhutan have paved the way for the country to strengthen community participation in snow leopard conservation for years to come.

*The snow leopard population count in Bhutan used camera traps to photograph and identify individual snow leopards.*



## A CITIZEN SCIENTIST

Phuchung Lachenpa is most at home in the high mountain valleys of India's eastern Himalaya, which towers over his hometown of Lachen in Sikkim. A yak herder and trekking guide, he is intimately familiar with the local mountains and the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, which protects the eastern half of the world's third-highest mountain. Today, he wanders these mountains as a citizen scientist, documenting the elusive snow leopard for the USAID-funded WWF Asia High Mountains Project.

After being trained by WWF staff in July 2015, Phuchung and five other local citizen scientists began the challenging work of setting up camera traps in remote Himalayan valleys. By periodically moving a set of 22 camera traps, their aim was to survey nearly 198,000 acres of potential snow leopard range in northeast Sikkim to establish the first baseline count for the local snow leopard population there.

Results were immediate. In August 2015, Phuchung went to retrieve a camera trap in a high mountain valley and was rewarded with the first photos ever taken of a snow leopard in North Sikkim District.

The camera trap photos collected by Phuchung and his team revealed five unique snow leopard individuals present in the survey region, adding an important new dimension to existing knowledge on snow leopard populations in this range area.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- WWF-India completed a series of six snow leopard sign, camera trap, and prey species surveys in North Sikkim between August and December 2016.
- Three surveys conducted from September 30 to December 10, 2016 along fixed transects counted 85 Tibetan argali and 70 blue sheep while seven snow leopard individuals were camera trapped.
- Stray dogs were recorded on camera traps during the snow leopard survey, highlighting the need for new policy and intervention strategies concerning feral dog control.

## A LASTING IMPACT

With proof of the snow leopard's presence in North Sikkim, groundwork for improving snow leopard conservation efforts in this region are now being laid. Survey findings will be used to inform ongoing snow leopard conservation efforts in the adjacent Kanchenjunga Conservation Area in northeast Nepal to the west as well as in contiguous snow leopard range areas of Bhutan to the east. The first ever snow leopard to be collared using GPS technology in Nepal was found to regularly cross the international border between Nepal and Sikkim, which has highlighted the critical importance of the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve as a transboundary corridor for this iconic high mountain species.

*Phuchung surveys snow leopard territory in the mountains, above his high altitude village of Lachen in North Sikkim.*

PHOTO : WWF India





## TURNING COMMUNITIES INTO GUARDIANS

The village of Ak-Shyrak, Kyrgyzstan has always been special to Farida Balbakova and Azat Alamanov. But with the Soviet collapse in 1991, they had to watch as people turned desperate and started exploiting nature: poaching snow leopards and their prey to survive.

Farida remembers spending many sleepless nights contemplating the deforestation, disappearance of animals, and degradation of pastures across the newly independent Kyrgyzstan. She says, “I felt as if the land was asking,” ‘please save me.’

In Ak-Shyrak and other isolated mountain villages, the duo started holding conservation workshops for adults. They organized children’s theater productions full of skits and songs about biodiversity, as well as games and festivals around events like Forest Day. And they tirelessly worked with government officials, rallied supporters, delivered petitions, wrote letters, and engaged with the media.

Over the years, their work has paid off. Farida and Azat convinced officials to view environmental impacts differently and understand the challenges associated with

habitat loss and climate change. Poachers switched from hunting snow leopards to protecting them as park rangers. Herders embraced more sustainable practices. Women began crafting and selling eco-friendly goods. And local children now lead a range of festivities for Snow Leopard Day.

## A LASTING IMPACT

Population surveys using snow leopard DNA analysis of scat to provide a more accurate estimate of snow leopards in the Sarychat Ertash Reserve has been conducted and will pave the way for science-based conservation interventions.

Public conservation awareness programs are turning inhabitants of mountain communities into snow leopard guardians, with these communities now conducting snow leopard population surveys and anti-poaching work.

AZAT ALAMANOV AND FARIDA BALBAKOVA



## SCHOOLCHILDREN SECURE A FUTURE FOR SNOW LEOPARDS

Four years ago, WWF researchers set up camera traps to photograph snow leopards on Khovd Aimag's Jargalant Khairkhan Mountain located in western Mongolia's Altai Mountains to determine this elusive cat's population size and distribution.

But when they retrieved the photos and videos, they were shocked by what they found.

A snow leopard was caught on camera hobbling around with a heavy steel jaw trap on one leg. The most tragic footage was of two three-legged snow leopards that had lost legs to jaw traps.

WWF needed to find a way to protect Jargalant Khairkhan's snow leopards from jaw traps. Working with the children of local herders living around Jargalant Khairkhan, the team came up with a novel trap exchange campaign. In exchange for traps surrendered to school eco-club members, local herders would receive a milk can or other useful household items.

The children gathered an impressive collection of 234 jaw traps, and decided to get rid of them permanently by creating a sculpture from their metal metal. The work of art commemorated the task the students took on to protect snow leopards and other wildlife in western Mongolia.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Three snow leopards caught on camera traps in distress, illustrated urgent need for a trap collection campaign, which led to children collecting and disabling traps.
- The first snow leopard cub quadruplets were subsequently camera trapped on Jargalant Khairkhan, symbolizing a safer environment for snow leopards.

### A LASTING IMPACT

The successful trap collection campaign was eventually scaled up to the national level. As a result of the trap removal campaign, thousands of wild animals have likely been saved, and it has raised the interest in snow leopard conservation.

The project has also laid the groundwork for resolving human-snow leopard conflict in Mongolia, with a national human-snow leopard conflict mitigation strategy currently being prepared.

*Children pose in front of the sculpture made from traps they collected on Jargalant Khairkhan Mountain in western Mongolia's Khovd Aimag.*



PHOTO: WWF Mongolia

In order to mark International Snow Leopard Day on October 23, 2016, WWF worked with the Gilgit office of Radio Pakistan to develop and broadcast a 45-minute snow leopard conservation awareness broadcast in Urdu as well as other local languages. Titled “Snow Leopards and Mountain Landscapes,” this program discussed the ecological importance of the snow leopard, threats to the snow leopard, and the need for landscape-level conservation management planning in northern Pakistan to protect this endangered species.

## HIGHLIGHTS

In the Hoper Valley, WWF worked with 18 citizen scientists to conduct snow leopard sign and prey species surveys, setting up camera traps at various locations in the Hoper Valley that captured the first photo of a snow leopard from this area.

In the mountain communities of northern Pakistan, predator proof corrals have been set up to help reduce human-snow leopard conflict at AHM Project sites in Pakistan.

Village wildlife guards have been recruited and trained to monitor snow leopards and their prey

and to combat wildlife poaching. These wildlife guards now work closely with district wildlife departments and help communities implement voluntary hunting bans.

## A LASTING IMPACT

A social survey conducted in the Khunjerab and the Central Karakorum National Parks in Gilgit-Baltistan found a decline in snow leopard killings since 2013, due in part to AHM Project conservation awareness raising and anti-poaching activities in this region.



*A predator proof corral in Pakistan helps reduce human-snow leopard conflict.*

## FOUR SNOW LEOPARDS COLLARED IN FOUR YEARS

Yalung is the fourth snow leopard to be successfully collared in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) of eastern Nepal. An initiative launched in 2013, the first ever GPS collaring of a snow leopard in Nepal was performed that year, with support from the WWF AHM Project. Data from these collars has provided insight into the transboundary movements of snow leopards between Nepal, India, and China and has provided many new insights into the snow leopard's behavior.

Collar data will also be important in developing landscape-scale conservation management plans and in delineating current snow leopard habitat in the Himalayas. With the completion of this mission, two female and two male snow leopards have been collared in KCA.

In addition, local citizen scientists have also been active in monitoring snow leopard and blue sheep populations in the KCA using various methodologies including camera traps. Notably, these citizen scientists were also core members of the collaring teams from 2013-2017.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- **Four snow leopards** GPS collared in **four years**.
- The first collared snow leopard reached an altitude of **5859 m (19,222 ft.)** – the highest documented so far for snow leopards across their 12-nation range.
- Collar data shows that snow leopards move regularly across the border from Nepal to India and China, highlighting the need for **transboundary cooperation**.

### A LASTING IMPACT

An exercise that started with support from international experts in 2013 has resulted in creation of a strong, capable national collaring team. These expeditions have not just built national capacity for advanced snow leopard research, but also provided new insights into the transboundary nature of snow leopard habitat along the Himalaya.

Data gathered has also been important in developing landscape-scale conservation management plans and for refining the existing snow leopard range map for the Himalayas as part of Nepal's commitments under the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program (GSLEP).

*With new research insights into the snow leopard, its population and its transboundary habitat, conservationists are able to make better decisions on how to protect the snow leopard and its fragile mountain home in the face of a changing climate. Pictured here is Yalung, the fourth snow leopard GPS collared in Nepal with support from the WWF AHM Project.*

PHOTO : Sanjog Rai/WWF Nepal







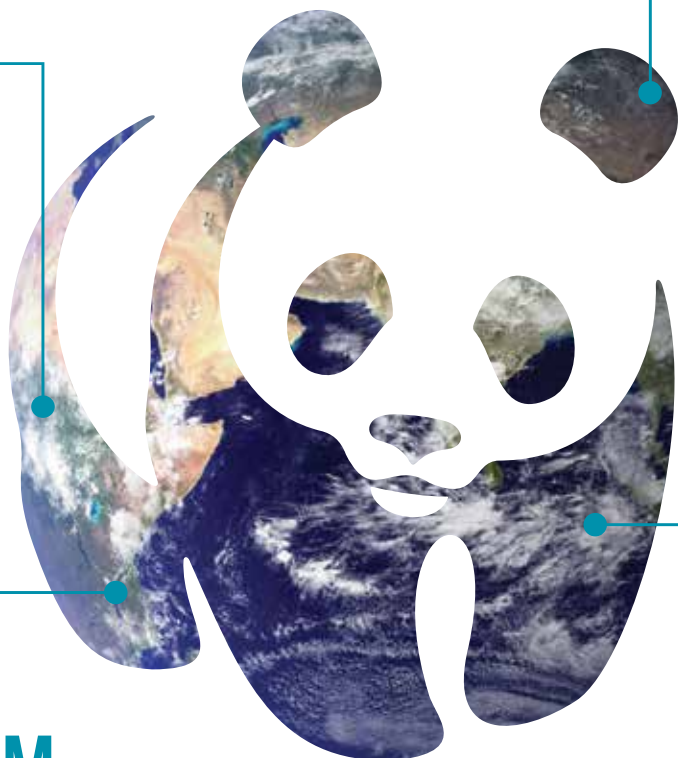
*The team that collared Yalung in Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. This capable national team consists of members from the Nepal government, communities, and partners, including WWF.*

1961

WWF was founded in 1961

+ 100

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on 5 continents



+ 5M

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World Wildlife Fund, 1250 24th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037  
T: +1-(202) 293-4800

For more information, please visit our website:

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