

Endangered Species: The Beauty of the Snow Leopard Can be Lost Forever

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It's a beautiful sight in it's natural habitat , but the snow leopard (Panthera uncia) a large cat native to the mountain ranges of Central and South Asia is endangered. It is listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List of threatened species, because, as of 2003, the size of the global wild population was estimated at 4,080-6,590 adults. According to Wiki, fewer than 2,500 individuals may be reproducing in the wild. As of 2016, estimates for the size of the global population vary from at least 4,080 to about 8,700 individuals only. Are they headed for extinction or only found in zoos, in the future?

Snow leopards inhabit alpine and subalpine zones at elevations from 3,000 to 4,500 m. They have been classified as *Uncia uncia* since the early 1930s. Interestingly, both the latinized genus name, *Uncia*, and the occasional English name ounce are derived from the Old French once, originally used for the European Lynx.

Snow leopards are slightly smaller than the other large cats like lions, and they have a relatively short body. However, the tail is quite long, at 80 to 100 with only the domestic cat being relatively longer-tailed. They are stocky and short-legged big cats, standing about 60 cm at the shoulder.

They have long, thick fur, and their base colour varies from smoky gray to yellowish tan, with whitish underparts. They have dark grey to black open rosettes on their bodies, with small spots of the same colour on their heads and legs and tails. Unusually among cats, their eyes are pale green or grey in colour.



Image, Source Wikipedia

Living in a cold, mountainous environment their bodies have adapted. They are stocky, their fur is thick, and their ears are small and rounded, all of which help to minimize heat loss. Their paws are wide, which distributes their weight better for walking on snow, and have fur on their undersides of the paws, to increase their grip on steep surfaces. Sadly, they cannot roar, because of the absence of the larynx. Instead they hiss, mew, growl and wail.

Today, the snow leopard is a highly threatened due to poaching, the loss of habitat and wild prey due to human habitation spreading, infrastructure development and conflict with herding communities, according to WWF. This has put the snow leopard on the brink of extinction. Exact numbers are unknown, but experts estimate that there may only be less than 4000 animals left in the wild. Various conservation organizations, including the Snow Leopard Trust, WWF, NABU, Snow Leopard Conservancy, WCS and Panthera, are working with local partners across the cat's range to protect it.

These organizations have joined forces to launch a campaign for the snow leopard's survival. In the campaign, which is called #SaveSnowLeopards, wildlife supporters around the world are invited to sign a petition, urging leaders from snow leopard range countries to take immediate action to save the cat.

“Conflict with local herder communities might be the most pressing threat snow leopards face today”, says Michael Despines, the Snow Leopard Trust's Executive Director. “Many of these people live below poverty lines, and can ill afford to lose livestock to attacks from predators. In desperation, they sometimes retaliate against snow leopards. To break this vicious circle, we need to support these communities and help them coexist with the cat.”

“TRAFFIC's analysis found that a minimum of four snow leopards were poached

every week since 2008; we strongly encourage all 12 range States to combat these unacceptably high levels of poaching and are ready to support these efforts by providing information to help target interventions to stop snow leopard poaching and trafficking,” said James Compton, TRAFFIC Senior Programme Director for Asia.

Even if poaching were brought under control, the snow leopard would still face urgent threats, such as the loss of its habitat and wild prey.

“Most snow leopard range states are developing countries or emerging economies. Many of them are planning or undertaking large-scale infrastructure or mining projects to boost growth. Such projects can be extremely disruptive to the fragile ecosystems that snow leopard’s call home. It’s critical for the snow leopard that they be well-planned to avoid damage”, says Rishi Kumar Sharma of WWF-India.

Specific requests to the countries where the cat is found include a strategy to combat poaching and banning the illegal trade of snow leopards, ensuring infrastructure development is sustainable, and driving investments in sustainable rural development that help decrease poverty while respecting the needs of wildlife.

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