

## Current distribution and status

The most cosmopolitan species of wild cat, the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) inhabits a wide variety of environments from the southern tip of east Africa to the Sea of Japan. In Asia, the leopard is declining throughout most of its range, especially in Bangladesh and the mountains of northern Pakistan. Several Asiatic subspecies of leopard are listed as endangered or critically endangered by the IUCN, and the challenges involved in their conservation are as various as the subspecies themselves.

The snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) is found in the high, arid mountains of central Asia, with the largest percentage of the species' habitat occurring in China, especially the Tibet region. Known to live in 12 countries, snow leopards range as far west as Afghanistan and north to Siberian Russia. The distribution of the species is becoming more fragmented, as human pressure leads to localised extinctions. The snow leopard is listed as endangered by the IUCN and it is estimated that only 3,500 to 7,000 remain in the wild.

The main habitat of the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) is the primary lowland tropical rainforest of South-east Asia, although the cat's range extends north to China's Yangtze River and west to the Himalayan foothills of central Nepal. The clouded leopard is extremely elusive and no population estimates are available, but it is thought to be in decline throughout its range and on the verge of extinction in Nepal and Taiwan. The IUCN has listed the clouded leopard as vulnerable because of widespread destruction and fragmentation of its habitat.



P. WEIMANN / STILL PICTURES

## What is being done?

WWF, the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT), and other groups are pursuing a variety of strategies to help ensure the survival of these magnificent cats. Among them are:

- **Monitoring illegal trade in cat bones and other body parts**  
TRAFFIC has been gathering information on illegal killings and trade in Asia's big cats in an attempt to better understand the motivations behind these killings and the changing dynamics of the trade – such as the re-emergence of demand for spotted cat pelts. This will enable the development of strategies to reduce and eliminate the killings and the demand.
- **Encouraging coexistence of people and cats**  
ISLT works closely with local people in snow leopard range countries to find solutions that enable people to pursue their traditional livelihoods in the presence of cats. One programme, Snow Leopard Enterprises, trains villagers to produce handicrafts that are marketed abroad, providing a boost to local incomes. In exchange, herders commit to specific conservation actions, including not poaching snow leopards or their prey. Other programmes train villagers to better protect their livestock from predation by wild cats.
- **Working to increase legal protections for Asia's spotted cats**  
WWF is spearheading efforts to expand the mandate of the Tiger Task Force – created under CITES to address trade in tiger pelts, bones, and other body parts – to encompass all Asian large cats.
- **Improving enforcement of existing protections**  
Environmental groups, including WWF and NABU, are helping to organise anti-poaching brigades in Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, and providing training and assistance to enforcement authorities.
- **Promoting cooperation between range countries**  
A Snow Leopard Survival Summit in May 2002, hosted by ISLT, brought together 52 experts from 17 countries, including 11 snow leopard range countries, to work on a comprehensive survival strategy for the species.
- **Preserving and recovering the natural prey species of big cats**  
WWF is developing an ungulate recovery programme for areas inhabited by the critically endangered Amur leopard, which is represented by only a few tens of individuals in northern China and the Russian Far East.
- **Promoting data sharing and monitoring protocols**  
ISLT has developed a standardised method for monitoring snow leopard and large mountain ungulate populations. Training has been provided and the protocols are in use in most range states. An interactive database enables local scientists to identify high-density areas and potential population levels, and to assess impacts of conservation efforts.

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# Asian leopards

The last cat species to become extinct was the sabre-toothed tiger. Will one of Asia's great spotted cats be next?

For thousands of years people have revered big cats for their physical beauty, graceful strength and hunting prowess. The power and mystique possessed by these creatures have aided their conservation, but have also fuelled a longstanding, now illegal, trade in cat pelts, bones and other body parts, and in live animals.

Today, this trade is often a by-product of the killing of cats in response to actual or perceived threats to livestock or human. However, the trade is also fed by targeted poaching which is on the rise. Combined with the development and habitat destruction that threaten ecosystems around the world, illegal trade has placed a number of cat species, including the leopard, snow leopard and clouded leopard of Asia, in peril.



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## Trade: A renewed threat

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the popularity of coats fashioned from leopard and other spotted cat pelts raised concern that these cats could be hunted to extinction. This concern became a driving force in the advent of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which was negotiated in 1973 and entered into force in 1975.

Under the CITES treaty, international trade in leopards, snow leopards, clouded leopards, or their pelts or body parts for commercial purposes has been banned, giving rise to a conservation success story. Effective public relations campaigns greatly reduced demand for spotted cat garments in North America and Europe, which combined with strong enforcement to reduce the trade in spotted cat pelts to a fraction of its former level. More recently, however, illegal trade has again arisen as a threat to Asia's spotted large cats. The pelts are becoming highly sought after as luxuries, symbols of prestige, or clothing among wealthy people in East and South-east Asia and the Middle East, and among the newly rich in Russia and the former Soviet Republics.

Leopard, snow leopard and clouded leopard bones, like those of tigers, are used in traditional Asian medicine. In fact, the bones of all Asian leopard species are sometimes prescribed as substitutes for tiger bone for the treatment of rheumatic diseases and aching joints and muscles. Efforts to control trade in tiger bone have certainly benefited the tiger, but may actually have increased pressure on other cats.

Evidence recently gathered by TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network of WWF and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), included:

- More than 90 clouded leopard skins and 25 leopard skins for sale at the wildlife market in Tachilek, Myanmar, a notorious centre of trade in large cat skins.
- Seizures made in Khaga, India – three tiger skins and 50 leopard skins in December 1999; four tiger skins, 175kg of tiger and other cat bones, 132 tiger claws, 70 leopard skins, and 18,000 leopard claws in January 2000; and four snow leopard skins and one tiger skin seized in the same area two days later.
- China may be a growing market for snow leopard skins, which have been seen for sale in numerous rural wildlife markets, and even in Beijing fur shops.



## Development and conflict

The clouded leopard depends on large, intact tracts of forest to find sufficient prey, but forests throughout its range are being cut down for agriculture. Almost no primary forest suitable for clouded leopards remains in India and Bangladesh, and only small, isolated fragments remain in southern China. Deforestation is considered the most serious threat to the cat's survival.

Leopards, by contrast, face threats when they come into direct conflict with people. They are highly adaptable cats, able to cope relatively well with habitat change and sometimes persisting even on the outskirts of large cities. However, their very versatility is the source of conflict with humans – the cats are often persecuted when they turn to domestic livestock as prey in settled areas, and are sometimes killed because of actual or perceived threats to human life.

The snow leopard, too, is often killed in retaliation for taking domestic livestock. Wild sheep and goats, the cat's usual prey, have been hunted out of many areas of Central Asia or have disappeared due to overgrazing by domestic livestock. The pastoralists who inhabit much of the snow leopard's range depend on their domestic herds for an often precarious livelihood, and the loss of a few or even one animal to a snow leopard may represent a real economic hardship for these families.

In many areas, trade in spotted cat pelts and other body parts is a by-product rather than the primary reason for killing the cats. In Mongolia, for instance, snow leopards are primarily killed in efforts to protect livestock, but pelts and bones are then sold on to traders or middlemen. However, targeted killing for trade also occurs and appears to be on the rise in some areas. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, snow leopard populations may have been reduced by as much as 50 per cent in the last decade, due to increased poaching for skins.

Although the cats are protected by law in most of their range states, enforcement of these laws is often lax due to limited resources and, in some cases, political upheaval. However, simply calling for stricter law enforcement without stopping the demand may not prevent the illegal killings, because the economic value of one of these cats is considerable. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, a snow leopard skin is worth several times the annual wage of a state worker.

## Unique cats

The loss of any of these cats would be a tragedy. The snow leopard, for example, is exquisitely adapted to its environment, its whitish-grey coat patterned with dark-grey rosettes, lending the animal excellent camouflage in its stark habitat of rock, shrub and snow. The cat can leap up to 30 feet, and is sure-footed on the steep, rocky slopes. Its thick tail, nearly as long as the rest of its body, provides balance and also warmth – the cat wraps it around its head and face when at rest.

The clouded leopard – named for its cloud-like markings, black-edged ovals on an ochre, tawny, or grey pelt – is also extremely agile. It is one of the best tree climbers in the cat family, with flexible ankle joints that enable it to descend tree trunks headfirst. The clouded leopard has the longest canine teeth in proportion to its body of any cat species: a characteristic that, along with DNA evidence, suggests the species is most closely related to the extinct sabre-toothed cat of North America.

Meanwhile, the leopard is remarkable not so much for its specialisation as for its versatility. It varies greatly in appearance, behaviour and size throughout its range, and can subsist on prey from arthropods to large ungulates. The leopard's massive skull and powerful jaw muscles enable it to take large prey despite a relatively small body size. Especially where other big cats are present, leopards often cache their kills in trees, and have been observed to drag prey two to three times their body weight over five metres up a trunk.

