

## Worrying downgrade — On snow leopard conservation

The elusive and charismatic snow leopard has lost its endangered status in the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, causing genuine worry among wildlife biologists, who believe this sends out the wrong signal to those working to protect it. If the argument for a downgrade to vulnerable status from endangered is that conservation actions have reduced the threat to the cat, there is an equally persuasive response on how little scientists know about its population health, given its remote habitat in the alpine zones of the Himalayas and trans-Himalayas. As a major range country, India has worked to protect these animals, and even launched a programme on the lines of Project Tiger for its conservation, covering 128,757 sq. km of habitat in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. There is also an upcoming international collaborative effort, the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program, involving the countries that make up the range of this graceful animal. It is vital that this momentum should not be lost merely on account of the technicality that the estimated numbers have crossed the threshold for an 'endangered' classification, which is 2,500. If anything, studies on its vulnerability have to be intensified, and the task of monitoring its entire habitat of high mountains speeded up.

It would be a disservice to conservation if governments shift their focus away from the big challenges to the snow leopard's future: trafficking in live animals in Central Asia, and hostility from communities because of its attacks on livestock. India handled the problem of the cat preying on goats, sheep, donkeys and other animals by roping in communities in conservation, and compensating them for any losses. An insurance programme in which residents of a part of Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh participated also worked well. New research indicates that even when wild prey is available, the attacks on livestock by snow leopards have cumulatively been on the rise. The response to this finding must be to insulate the owners from losses and encourage them to move away from traditional pastoral grazing. A more fundamental worry is over the likely loss of habitat owing to changing climate patterns. Fortunately, research models indicate that there are considerable stretches of steppes in High Asia that could withstand climate-related changes in the greater Himalayan region, creating refuge lands for snow leopards. Today, the factors that pose a threat to the species remain unchanged, and the IUCN down-listing, which changes the classification since 1986, should not be misread by policymakers. If conservation has protected the cat, it must be strengthened by enlarging protected areas in all the range countries, and keeping out incompatible activities such as mining and human interference.

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