

# Downgrading the Ghost

The IUCN recently moved snow leopards from Endangered to Vulnerable category, which is a cause for concern when it comes to their conservation

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The snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) is a big cat found in high-altitude ecosystems of central and south Asia across 12 range countries. Like other large predators, the species is intrinsically rare – even though it inhabits a large geographical range (almost 1.8 million sq. km) with global populations guesstimated from 7,367 to 7,884 in the country status chapter of the book *Snow Leopards* (McCarthy and Mallon 2016).

Up until the 1970s, snow leopards remained largely unstudied in the wild. Back then, information about snow leopards was accrued from anecdotal observations in the wild, often made by big game hunters roaming remote areas in search of wild sheep and goat trophies. The reason snow leopards are often called ‘Ghost of the Mountains’ is because of limited information on their biology and ecology. The inhospitable and rugged terrain where these magnificent animals occur posed peculiar challenges in conducting



On the prowl amidst nature

adequate studies. As a result, only 2-4% of their global range has been studied for population estimation so far. Snow leopards have received a lot of global attention recently and few vital international initiatives have started providing answers to basic questions.

Recent assessment of the threatened snow leopards has placed them in the Vulnerable (population numbers fewer than 10,000 mature individuals) category from Endangered (estimated to number fewer than 2,500 mature individuals) in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species is a globally accepted system of categorising wild flora and fauna according to their population status and severity of threat to their survival.

Moving the snow leopard from Endangered to Vulnerable category is a scientific decision, and one of the key agenda should focus on translating and communicating this change to the people sharing habitat with the animal. For example, a



Snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) at the roof of the world

Keeping a watch - sentry duty



Himalayan brown bears (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) are co-predators and share the landscape that snow leopards inhabit with humans

patient (in this case, snow leopards) has now been transferred from the ICU to the general ward. Some may think the patient is out of danger but the crucial point is that the patient is still in hospital and needs proper care and diagnosis. Moreover, in the case of snow leopards, range-wide population estimates are severely lacking.

Amongst critical threats to the species, retributory killing of snow leopards and popular ‘stone pit wolf traps’ are in common use to reduce economic losses. In addition, illegal trade in live snow leopards and their body parts is another aspect (that may be linked with retaliation) (Maheshwari and Niraj 2018). Apart from increasing poaching in remote parts of their range, mining (like in Mongolia) and infrastructure development, is degrading and fragmenting snow leopard habitats as well. Will the change in IUCN category benefit the perception of the snow leopard? I know that Critically Endangered and Endangered species receive most of the care and attention because they are considered closest to extinction.

Snow leopards are true trans-boundary representatives of 12 range countries but they suffer from war and related activities of politically unstable and sensitive international borders, which also restricts trans-boundary collaborations in population monitoring and curbing poaching. Biologists may differ on this downgrading but I feel that taking this decision after more rigorous studies would have been appropriate. Key programmes such as Global Snow Leopard & Ecosystem Protection Program (GSLEP) and Securing livelihoods,

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Conservation, Sustainable Use and Restoration of high range Himalayan Ecosystems (SECURE) are either in the process of contributing or finalising the implementation of field studies to achieve more robust population estimation, which can assist in rationalising snow leopard status.

With this article, on behalf of snow leopards, I express my concerns linked to their threatened status. More importantly, what is the government’s response in conserving this species? Have all efforts made so far been adequate? Does this change in snow leopard status mean anything to local communities living with these animals?