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Snow Leopard Conservation in the USSR

by Kathleen Braden

One of the largest remaining populations of wild snow leopards, reported to number approximately 2,000, may be found in the USSR. In 1985, the Soviets listed the snow leopard in their national *Red Book of Endangered Species* in Category 3: rare but not immediately threatened with extinction. This listing was an upgrade from the 1978 *Red Book*, which noted the snow leopard as highly endangered, and may be due more to better reporting procedures than to an actual increase in numbers within the USSR. (See *Snow Line*, no. 8, 1985.) Despite this improved picture, the Soviets have taken steps in three types of activities to ensure a continuing population of wild snow leopards within their borders.

(1) Protection of Wild Snow Leopards: Hunting, trapping, or exporting snow leopards is illegal in the USSR by legislation at both national and local levels; although some trapping is still apparently done for domestic zoos, such as the Alma-Ata Zoo which received two wild snow leopards in 1984. The USSR is a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources; *Red Books* of Soviet endangered species were published in 1974, 1978, and 1985; and the USSR has signed the CITES agreement against trade in products from endangered species. In addition to legislation, snow leopards are protected on many reserves in the USSR, called *zapovedniki*, from the Russian word "forbidden," and managed under the Ministry of Agriculture. Twelve out of approximately 125 national reserves are in snow leopard habitat. The largest of these twelve are the Altay Reserve in the Russian Union Republic, which at 863,861 hectares is slightly smaller than Yellowstone in the U.S., and Issyk-kul'skiy Reserve, 781,600 hectares, in the Kirgizian Union Republic. Economic activity is prohibited in reserves, although sometimes people use the reserves for outdoor recreation or scientific field research.

(2) Scientific Study: Several Soviet biologists and zoologists have studied the snow leopard in the wild. Perhaps the Soviet scholar with the most

experience in field research on snow leopards is Eugene Koshkarev, a biologist with the Kirgizian Academy of Sciences, who has also studied at Moscow State University. Koshkarev has spent many harsh winters in the mountains southeast of Lake Issyk-Kul near the Sino-Soviet border, tracking snow leopards, and has published his research in Soviet and western publications. Koshkarev is a member of the International Snow Leopard Trust. Research on snow leopards is under the auspices of several scientific bodies in the USSR, including the Academy of Sciences and departments of various universities. In addition, an interdepartmental commission on reserves was created in 1984 to coordinate efforts among the different disciplines. Periodic conferences on endangered animals are held in the USSR. For example, the second all-Union conference on endangered species, which was held in Moscow in 1977, heard six separate papers on snow leopards. Unfortunately, the language barrier often prevents the work of Soviet scientists from being disseminated in the West, but the ISLT has had over fifteen articles on snow leopards translated from Russian to English, thereby enlarging our knowledge about wild snow leopards.

Finally, Soviet scientists can cooperate with western scholars via the yearly environmental exchanges which are overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1982 four members of the ISLT visited the USSR under the auspices of this agreement to discuss captive management of snow leopards with Soviets at zoos in Moscow and Alma-Ata. Since then the Moscow and Bronx zoos have exchanged snow leopards to enlarge the genetic pool of captive stock.

(3) Education: Wildlife has long played an important role in Russian culture and attention is given to the education of both adults and children with respect to the place of fauna in the environment. Conservation societies for citizens exist in most large cities and museums and zoos present large billboard exhibits on endangered species. ISLT members visiting the USSR in 1982 and 1984 saw such displays on snow leopards at both the Moscow and Alma-Ata zoos. Often the Soviet government finds some unusual channels for sending the conservation message to the general public. This author has collected bookmarks, postage stamps, and even matchbooks picturing snow leopards and