

Snow leopard cub rescued from Khunjerab riverbank in Gojal Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

On December 31, 2012, field staff of Gilgit-Baltistan Wildlife Department and members of Khunjerab Villagers' Organization (KVO) encountered a snow leopard cub along the riverbank (Vadkhoon) of Khunjerab River.



The team reported that the cub was following her mother across the icy river but did not make it, while her mother crossed the river, safely.



The temperature remains below zero in the Khunjerab valley during the winter months. Seeing the cub helpless and prone to natural threats (predation, hostile weather conditions), the team crossed the river, captured the cub, and brought it to Wildlife Check Post, Sost in Gojal Valley. The cub was kept warm and recovered successfully.



Thereafter, the KVO team approached senior officials of the Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) Wildlife Department to decide the cub's fate. The Department asked the Snow Leopard Foundation (SLF) for technical assistance. The SLF and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) arranged a visit of a local expert team headed by the Divisional Forest Officer, Wildlife Department, GB on January 1, 2013. The team inspected the cub and reported that she was in good health, weighed ten kilograms, measured 46 cm in length (body = 26 cm, tail = 20 cm), and was feeding normally.



The team scanned the area and located tracks of the captured cat's mother. The cub was left out in the wild for four hours in a cage with hopes that the mother would return. However, this strategy did not work and the team retrieved the cub. The only available option was to keep it in captivity but the question was where, how, and for how long?



Having considered the situation, The SLF facilitated a meeting of stakeholders on January 4, 2013 chaired by the conservator, Parks and Wildlife Department, GB. Participants discussed the situation in detail, and based on scientific considerations and social factors, agreed that the cub could not be released into the wild at this stage as the mother could not be traced and the cub was not self-sufficient. However, they expressed concern over the lack of appropriate local facilities and expertise to handle such captured wild animals. The participants collectively agreed that efforts had to be made to explore avenues for the required resources to assure the cub's long-term survival. The following key decisions were made:

- i) The cub will not be trans-located out of GB, but will be kept in Naltar, GB.
- ii) Department field staff previously entrusted with the care of Leo, the snow leopard cub found in 2005 in GB, will once again do the same for this cub.
- iii) The SLF will help monitor the cub and liaise with international experts in the event of a mishap.

- iv) The WCS, SLF, and Department will help arrange short training sessions for the concerned staff in captured-wildlife handling and rearing.
- v) The department will examine the case with the chief secretary office through the Secretary Forest/Wildlife, GB to allocate finances from the government's share of trophy-hunting fees or other projects like FRF, park entry fee (PEF), and even through the GB ADP to cover the expenses of rearing the cub.
- vi) All stakeholders will help cover any shortfalls in finances.
- vii) The WCS will provide technical support in establishing the rehabilitation center and arranging trainings as per a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed with the government soon after Leo was transported to the Bronx Zoo in New York, USA.
- viii) The department will take the lead in raising awareness among local people (in collaboration with concerned stakeholders) urging them not to capture any species in future, unless found sick or injured.

It is important to mention here that this is the third such incident in the region since 1998, and KVO was involved in all three rescues. The present case occurred in the KVO-managed conservation area in the periphery of KNP. Over the years, KVO has developed into a model community-based conservation organization in the region and is a potential partner for the SLF.

An estimated 200–420 snow leopards exist in Pakistan's northern mountains across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), GB, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). A national-level assessment deemed the species "critically endangered" (Sheikh and Malour, 2004) within the country. While small, Pakistan's snow leopard population represents the world's third largest by size, tied with India, highlighting the country's importance for conserving the species worldwide. Within Pakistan, the GB province contains the largest proportion (> 60%) of the country's snow leopard population (Hussain, 2003) which is largely concentrated in the province's two largest and adjoining national parks, KNP and Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP). To the north, KNP and CKNP border important snow leopard habitat in China, home to the largest population of the cat throughout its 12-country range. Given the large home ranges of individual cats, it is fair to assume that the Karakoram Range in Pakistan forms a large wildlife corridor important for the overall genetic flow between snow leopards in Pakistan, China, and India. The increasing human-snow leopard conflict in the region is human induced, economically fueled, and could be deemed a major threat to the survival of the species if prompt and tangible measures are not taken in the near future.

As far as the recent incident is concerned, the department is doing its best in collaboration with potential non-government partner organizations

to establish proper facilities in the region. We request all international partners to extend their full support in making this event an opportunity to better safeguard the cause of predator conservation in the region.

Sheikh, K. M. and Molur, S. (Eds.). 2004. Status and Red List of Pakistan's Mammals. Based on the Conservation Assessment and Management Plan Workshop: IUCN Pakistan.

Hussain, S. 2003. The status of the snow leopard in Pakistan and its conflict with local farmers. *Oryx* 37: 26–33.

