

“Enhancing conservation awareness among youth through school visits by local rangers in Osh Oblast, Kyrgyzstan”



A proud biology teacher receiving a snow leopard calendar with other red listed species fines in Sakty Toktorov Middle School in Ak-Bulak village, Nookat.

Credits: Tolobai Karimov 2022-11-13

Project Team:

Fatima Mannapbekova, Tolkunbek Asykulov, Kubanych Jumabai Uulu, Rana Bayraccismith, Byron Weckworth and Shannon Kachel

Submitted To:

Snow Leopard Training Grant Program 2022
Snow Leopard Network



Project title: Enhancing conservation awareness among youth through school visits by local rangers in Osh Oblast, Kyrgyzstan

Country & region where work will be carried out: Alai, Kara-Khulja, Chong-Alai, Nookat districts in the Osh Oblast, Kyrgyzstan.

Context:

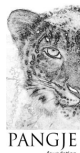
Located in southern Kyrgyzstan along the border of Tajikistan, Alai Range is in the northern rim of the Pamir-Alay Mountain system. The region has high biogeographical and conservation importance. Encompassing an area of 14,000 km², it is bound by the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in the south and high mountains in the north [1]. The study area is part of Kyrgyz-Ata National Park, a protected area within the Osh Oblast [2]. The primary industry among the local population is animal husbandry in the traditional transhumance of sheep, goats and yaks. Watanabe et al. (2010) has suggested that livestock grazing, in addition to legal and illegal hunting, is significant anthropogenic disturbances in Kyrgyz Alai.

The proposed project for this grant application builds off of preliminary findings from an ongoing snow leopard conservation project in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. In Autumn 2021, occupancy and household surveys were conducted to comprehend and enhance capacity for snow leopard conservation. The survey project is funded by Panthera and Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund. In partnership with the local NGO Ilbirs Foundation, this project examined wildlife sightings, human-wildlife conflict and attitudes of communities towards wildlife in the Alai Mountain Range.

We, the project coordinators, worked with considerable guidance from local rangers and hunters from the Department of Biodiversity. One ranger stood out to us – Tolonbai Karimov. Tolonbai has 15 years of experience in the department and runs monthly school visits to educate the youth on local wildlife protection and addresses fines for killing Red-Listed species. Rangers receive a salary of 5000 soms/month (roughly \$60/month). Currently, Tolonbai is the only ranger running this educational initiative, spending funding out of his own pocket. **The objective of the proposed project is to train more rangers in Osh Oblast to teach youth about wildlife and conservation. The goal of the proposed project is to motivate rangers and to enhance their capacity to influence grass-roots level conservation.**

Training objectives:

1. Develop an interactive one-day school curriculum with training materials
2. Train the rangers to deliver the curriculum
3. Pilot the school curriculum in 8 schools in 4 regions
5. Approach (target audience, training methodology/philosophy, collaborations)



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The target audience are rangers and youth in rural and remote mountain villages in Osh Oblast. We plan to have a hands-off approach in coordinating rangers, allowing the organization and leadership of Tolonbai and his vision to prevail. The philosophy comes from the need to contextualize public education to common localized human-wildlife conflicts.

The first objective is to develop an interactive one-day school curriculum and training materials (using informational posters*). This one-day curriculum will be made using Tolonbai's existing teaching agenda and survey project findings. It will include basic social, economic, and ecological challenges to communities and ecosystems. Necessary permission to teach can be proven using the employment contract of each ranger. Public outreach and collaboration with the Department of Education is a requirement in the job description of rangers working for the Department of Biodiversity.

*Tolonbai currently uses donated informational posters by the Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU) and Snow Leopard Trust (SLT). We have received a total of 500 posters from NABU and SLT for this project. (See Figure 1 and 2 below)

Project coordinators Fatima and Altynai will provide logistics support for Tolonbai. In March, during our visit to Osh we will finalize the materials for the curriculum, divide schools between rangers, set dates for school visit by December 2022, and distribute posters and stationary materials.

Main expected results:

Rangers are motivated and successfully complete 40 school visits/workshops by December 2022. Students learn about the dynamic relationships between humans and wildlife and have a positive attitude towards protecting and sharing habitat with snow leopards.

Resource teams' expertise:

Tolkunbek Asykulov, Country Director Kyrgyzstan office, Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Organization

Kubanych Jumabai Uulu, Director Kyrgyzstan office, Snow Leopard Trust

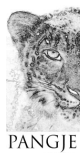
Rana Bayrakcismith, Senior Program Manager Conservation Science, Panthera

Byron Weckworth, Director, Snow Leopard Program, Panthera

Shannon Kachel, Conservation Scientist, Snow Leopard Program, Panthera

Results:

Phase 1 – Curriculum design



For the purpose of the project, 500 environmental education posters, calendars and booklets were donated by NABU and OSCE. They contain information about Kyrgyzstan's ecosystems, such as red listed species, legislations on fines for illegal hunting, current trends and permitted hunting seasons. In addition, several larger posters focusing on government fines for illegal hunting of species found in Kyrgyzstan were provided.

Aibek Sergek-Uulu, from the Snow Leopard Foundation in Bishkek, consulted us on educational tools and materials for schools. This helped us understand that working with Grade 7s was the best age group to engage in this topic – because of their critical thinking skills and lesser academic pressure unlike high schoolers.

We've met with Tolonbai Karimov (Head ranger for Nookat District, Osh Oblast) in March 2022 in order to clarify necessary information that needs to be shared with students. Using available educational materials, a curriculum was designed which focused on highlighting overarching topics on red listed species, fines, permitted hunting/harvesting seasons, and information about national parks in the country and region. It should be noted, the information materials provided were in Kyrgyz language only, so peer review could not be made.

Phase 2 – Ranger trainings

Three additional rangers from the neighboring districts – Alidin Mamajunusov (Chong Alay district head ranger), Tynchtykbek Ziyayev (Uzgen district head rangers) and Alimbek Aidarov (Alay district head ranger) have received training on school visits by Tolonbai. Each ranger was asked to do 5 school visits at minimum from September to December, 2022.

Project coordinator, Fatima visited in October 2022 to receive feedback, help with re-budgeting, payments and identifying quantity of visits required per each ranger.

Phase 3 – School visits

By the time we received the grant funds, it was already April 2022, and almost the end of the school year in Kyrgyzstan. It was only after the start of the new school year in Tolonbai trained other rangers (September 2022). For the period September to November 2022, 30 conservation awareness seminars have been conducted in 20 schools by all four rangers. Each school was given an average of 3 posters and 20 booklets with additional posters and booklets given and displayed in Ayil Okmotu (village administrative offices). Rangers reported that students enjoyed their school visits, especially learning about Red Listed species that they co-exist with. Biology teachers gave positive feedback for receiving posters and expressed shortage of learning booklets, they asked for more copies. The goal of number of seminars was not achieved because of increased fuel costs and difficulty of transportation. The 12-month inflation rate increased to 14.5 percent in April 2022, up from 11.2 percent in December last year, driven by increases for food and fuel prices - 18 percent and 55 percent, respectively¹. Tolonbai trained the rangers in the administrative office in Osh city and we used funds allocated for ranger training to support fuel costs. It should be noted that an average distance between villages in Pamir-Alai mountain range is 15km on rubble roads. In addition,

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kyrgyzrepublic/brief/monthly-economic-update>



in winter it becomes difficult to access certain villages. For example, the road after the bridge crossing to Kulchu in Chong Alai gets shut off for vehicles once it snows. Locals reported that, this autumn a truck containing 2 tons of harvested potatoes tumbled over to the river just before reaching the bridge. This unfortunate incident is an extreme example telling of road conditions in Osh oblast. Therefore the rangers visited schools in close proximity to main roads.

Discussion:

- Hands-off approach of this project was good to build trust and increase ranger incentive. We showed other rangers Tolonbai's work as an example to be followed. He was previously self-funding his educational awareness work. This project not only supported his goal but also helped spread its influence to other districts of Osh Oblast. Ventures like this are essential for conservation in rarely studied wildlife sites like Pamir-Alay mountains. Rangers have limited experience working with international NGOs hence, building trust is an essential step to continue other collaborative work in the region.
- However, a challenge in a hands-off approach is the difficulty to monitor the quality of seminars. For others wishing to do similar work, accountability can be kept through constant communication. One ranger should be assigned as the team leader and disseminate aims of the project. I would recommend to do one monitoring visit in a school. This will verify project expectations for everyone. In addition, this would help with having better photos and visual documentation of the project, as the rangers don't have access to taking good quality photos.
- One of the successes of this project was that it gave motivation for rangers to connect to the international conservation community. Ranger salaries in Kyrgyzstan are 6000som (USD\$72) a month, not enough to meet the financial needs of a family. Often rangers need a complementary job to support their income, they do not have no extra time and resources to do the public engagement work. This project helped building trust with international organizations and connected them to the larger community of snow leopard conservationists. We have been working with Tolonbai and the three other rangers of this project since 2021 for survey work, seminars and doing camera trap study. This small grant helped boost our relationship and continue to build trust with rangers who are frontline workers in snow leopard habitat conservation.
- Transportation costs, inflation rates and village accessibility should be considered in the project design. For others doing similar projects, or for us next time, we will prioritize doing educational seminars in villages at a higher altitude or a with difficult road access to beginning or end of the school year. September and May are usually warm and snow free in mountainous regions.

Next steps:

Jyrgalbek Isaev, head ranger of Bek-Tosot Conservancy heard about our project and came up with an idea to launch a summer-camp to train 10 youth conservation workers on and off the

field. Currently, our Panthera team is evaluating the costs and possibilities of supporting his incentive.

Photographs:

Image 1: Tolonbai giving out informational booklets to the teachers in school N^o224 in Nookat District.

Credits: Tolonbai Karimov 2022-10-03



Image 2: Tolonbai giving an educational seminar to N. Temiraliev Middle School in Kyrgyz-Ata village,
Nookat
Credits: Tolonbai Karimov 2022-09-13



Image 3: A proud biology teacher receiving a snow leopard calendar with other red listed species fines in Sakty Toktorov Middle School in Ak-Bulak village, Nookat.
Credits: Tolobai Karimov 2022-11-13



Image 4: Alimbek during an educational seminar at Satiev Shamshy Middle School in Josholu village, Alai

Credits: Alimbek Aidarov 2022-11-13

