GSLEP Forum August 24ᵗʰ, 2017
Session 2: Population assessment of world's snow leopards
(Closed: Senior officials and Strategic Forum partners)

The meeting was held primarily to address the concern about lack of credible estimates about snow leopard population estimates from across the species range. Given the mention in the Kathmandu Resolution and follow up queries from various quarters about the snow leopard population estimation, the meeting was organized to propose a way forward. The issue of downlisting conservation status of snow leopard from endangered to vulnerable was highlighted and discussed during the meeting. Concerns were raised about the premature nature of such a decision in absence of scientific evidence. No proper estimates have ever been obtained, and it would be embarrassing and awkward if immediately after this forum the snow leopard's status is downgraded without availability of proper estimates.

Presentation by GSLEP Secretariat on Population Assessment of the World's Snow Leopards (PAWS!), a collaborative initiative proposed with range countries' support and partnership with various international organizations:
- Snow Leopard: icon of high mountains
- How many snow leopards? Figures vary a lot: 3,000 – 8,000
  - These are, at best, guesstimates – we do NOT know!
- Why do we need to know how many?
  - Effort and resources going into *most important* SL habitats?
  - Are our efforts having a positive impact? Is population going up?
  - Are we losing populations we didn't even know existed?
  - How can we do status assessments if we do not know?
- Less than 2% of global SL range has ever been sampled systematically for population assessment. Moreover, the study sites representing this 2% are biased towards the best habitats and not randomly sampled, meaning that extrapolation provides a completely misleading picture than the situation actually on the ground (total range: 2 million square km!)
- Better and more expansive scientific monitoring is needed: Kathmandu GSLEP resolution
- How to go about doing population assessments?
  - Stage 1: Distribution Modeling
    - Sign surveys and interviews
  - Stage 2: Intensive sampling
    - Collaboration is the key
    - Camera trapping, genetic sampling – both have virtues and limitations
  - Stage 3: Analysis and reporting
    - Very computation-heavy – need access to supercomputers
- Capacity-building and local employment generation
  - Train local people and rangers to do lots of the fieldwork!
- Suggested Operational Structure
  - Collaborations (governments and universities/research institutions)
  - Funds (regional resources, national resources, organizational co-funding)

- o   Training & Capacity building (training modules/manuals, training plan)
- o   Data (collection, national level management, analysis)
- o   Outputs (Scientific, outreach)
- None of this can be achieved without support from the range country Governments

Discussion Notes
- Chair
    - o   Need more studies, more research in estimating populations of wildlife
- Co-Chair
    - o   Big danger in downgrading the conservation status of the SL – stick together in maintaining its current status
- Pakistan:
    - o   Need to maintain the "Precautionary Principle " of the Rio Declaration while taking decisions on issues having insufficient data.
    - o   Vulnerability of species is exacerbated with unpredictable and changing climate.
    - o   Important to note how white-rumped vultures were reduced to less than 1% of their population in less than a decade from all range countries.
    - o   Concerned with demotion of SL status demotion.
- India"
    - o   Landscapes have not been properly documented. No concrete population estimations – needs to be done to have a benchmark
    - o   Need user-friendly methods/standard protocols so all range countries are in a position to utilize them and determine proper population estimates
    - o   But we cannot wait for numbers to arrive! Will take many years → thus need to look for other strategies to arrest its imminent downgrading by IUCN
- Nepal:
    - o   Let's develop a common protocol with multiple methods – not just one single method
- Tajikistan:
    - o   Need more sophisticated methodology to get accurate numbers
    - o   Personally witnessed disappearance of SL at lower altitudes
    - o   Biggest population could be in Tajikistan but yet to be proven
- Mongolia:
    - o   Camera trap, telemetry, DNA surveys can be used to survey snow leopards
    - o   Need to select the best methodologies – need to discuss with all countries to determine these
- Pakistan
    - o   What is the basis for those pushing to downgrade the status of the SL? We have seen the opposite results in our population estimations
- Afghanistan
    - o   Population assessment: we have to do it. But how? How much time? Do we have sufficient human resources? Capacity? Will take at least 5 years, but our deadline is 2020. Can we prioritize population assessment among all range countries?
    - o   Conservation unfortunately is not a high priority for many countries

- Chair
    - We as governments have to choose to prioritize GSLEP landscapes
    - Need to use a combination of methods applicable at large scales, and then randomly sample areas from within. These are the sites where one needs to do more intensive sampling of the snow leopard populations using best available methods.
- Co-Chair
    - Methodology is still evolving
    - No clarity on estimates
    - We don't know the habitats, numbers, or stresses
    - Cannot make a decision without knowing! We have no information about 98% of the area – Thus how can they make a decision about lowering the status without proper information. No scientific research to back this decision – ridiculous, alarming, unreasonable, unilateral, and unacceptable
- Chair
    - *Vote that this is unacceptable – passed*.
    - A team identified to draft a statement that such a downgrade absolutely cannot happen without prior information
        - Afghanistan, India and Nepal to create the draft before 5pm today. We will meet again to finalize this document – Thank you for solidarity

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