

First Far Eastern Leopard Captured in Southeast Russia

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Just three days after catching a Siberian tiger in the Russian Far East, an international team led by biologists from the Wildlife Conservation Society captured another species last week that carries the dubious distinction of being the world's most endangered big cat: an extremely Far Eastern leopard.

One of only 30 left in the wild, the animal was captured in a “trapline” – a series of snares set out by scientists to temporarily catch big cats for genetic analysis. The 45 kg (100 pound) male was captured in Southwest Primorski Krai in the southern Russian Far East less than 20 miles from the Chinese border, and just a mile from where a large male Siberian tiger had been caught days earlier.

Before the leopard was released, a team of scientists from WCS, Institute of Biology and Soils of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Laboratory of Genomic Diversity of the National Cancer Institute conducted a suite of medical evaluations including the collection of sperm to assess its capacity to reproduce. Genetic analyses, used in conjunction with other bio-medical evaluations, will be used to determine whether leopards and tigers suffer from the effects of inbreeding by closely related individuals, a common problem in small wildlife populations.

Although more than 400 Siberian tigers occur in the wild, less than 20 tigers in Southwest Primorye are isolated from the main population of Siberian tigers to the east and north, raising questions about their genetic

composition and vigor of this subpopulation. With only 30 individuals remaining in the wild, all in Southwest Primorye, the Far Eastern leopard is far more endangered than the tiger, and hence concerns about the genetic status of this animal are even greater. Up to now, no information on these wild animals has been available to assess the risk of disease or inbreeding.

“This capture represents a milestone in our cooperative efforts to save the Far Eastern leopard and Siberian tiger from extinction,” said Dale Miquelle, Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Russia Program, which has led coordination of this project. “With the information gained from these animals, and others to come, we will be in a much better position to determine appropriate conservation actions.”

If inbreeding is considered a serious problem, new genetic material may be introduced into this population, as was done for the Florida panther. In that situation, when poor reproduction and physical abnormalities suggested that inbreeding was the culprit, pumas from Texas were introduced into Florida, resulting in increased reproductive rates and greater vitality of the Florida population. Such actions may be necessary for the Far Eastern leopard, but decisions will be made only after analyses of a representative sample of the remaining population.

The study is the first of its kind to provide vital indicators of the health status of leopards and tigers in this region. The project is part of a larger program to conserve both Siberian tigers and Far Eastern leopards which is overseen by the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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