

Critically endangered Amur leopards captured on video

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Recent video footage from a survey on a group of critically endangered Amur leopards in the Russian Far East has yielded unexpectedly positive results, giving evidence that some wild groups of the big cat are showing clear signs of a tendency towards population growth, says WWF Russia.

The recordings, which document a total of 12 leopards, reveal two different pairs of the rare spotted animals and one individual in the Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve and “Leopardoviy” Federal Wildlife Refuge in Russia’s Primorsky Province, located between the Sea of Japan and the Chinese border.

One scene captures a pair of leopards moving languidly through a small forest clearing, while a second shows a female leopard parenting a nearly grown-up cub.

“In the previous 5 years of camera-trapping, we were able to identify between 7 and 9 individual leopards in this monitoring plot every year. But this year, the survey was record-breaking: today 12 different leopards inhabit the territory,” says Sergei Aramilev, Species Program Coordinator at WWF Russia’s Amur Branch. “The results are pointing to a population increase of up to 50 per cent within the target group in Kedrovaya Pad and Leopardoviy,” he adds, “and I think we can attribute this to improvements in how our reserves are managed and the long-term efforts that have gone into leopard conservation.”

There are fewer than 50 Amur leopards remaining in the wild. To help understand how to better protect this rare animal, WWF Russia and the Institute of Sustainable Use of Natural Resources (ISUNR), a non-profit organization based in Vladivostok, and the Pacific Institute of Geography of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Science have carried out this regular survey for the past 6 years.

Leopards changing their spots

The Amur leopard now inhabits only a fraction of its original range, which once extended throughout China’s Northeastern provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang, and into the Korean Peninsula. In Russia, about 80 per cent of the species’ former range disappeared between 1970 and 1983.

Unsustainable logging, forest fires and land conversion for farming are the main causes. The Amur leopard – which is also known as the Far-Eastern leopard, Korean leopard and Manchurian leopard - has also been hit hard by poaching, mostly for its unique spotted fur.

In December 2010, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov announced that the government would take urgent measures to protect the critically endangered species, including the creation of a new national park – the “Land of Leopard”.

The new, larger reserve would merge the Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve with the nearby Leopardovy Wildlife Refuge in Russia. The Hunchun Nature Reserve in China, also an important habitat for Amur leopards, is expected to be added at a later date to form a transboundary protected area.

“Even the first steps towards establishing the “Land of Leopard” national park are having positive results. The fact that the number of Amur leopards has grown from 7 to 12 on the monitoring plot offers proof that creating one united trans-boundary protected area is the right idea,” says Yury Darman, director of WWF Russia’s Amur branch.

First use of video monitoring

This is the first time WWF [Russia](#) and ISUNR have used video-enabled cameras to monitor the leopards living in and around the Kedrovaya Pad [Nature Reserve](#).

“The digital cameras helped us capture longer image sequences for the survey, which gave us important insights into these very unique [animals](#)’ lives,” comments Sergei Aramilev. “What we’ve seen this year suggests that the leopard group being surveyed is experiencing a tendency towards [population growth](#). We hope that next winter, after the monitoring is carried out across the entire range, this trend will be proven true,” he continues.

A similar monitoring program is being run by the Wildlife Conservation Society in plots to the north of Kedrovaya Pad, covering part of the federal Leopardovy Wildlife Refuge and the Nezhinskoye Hunting

Estate. Integrated data obtained from both monitoring plots will be available in the coming months.

Provided by WWF

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