First snow leopards collared in Afghanistan

July 17 2012

This is the first collared snow leopard after it was fitted with a satellite collar. Credit: John Goodrich/WCS

Two snow leopards were captured, fitted with satellite collars, and released for the first time in Afghanistan by a team of Wildlife Conservation Society conservationists and Afghan veterinarians conducting research during a recent expedition.

The team successfully captured and released the male snow leopards on May 27 and June 8 respectively. Each cat was weighed, measured, fitted with a Vectronix satellite collar, and DNA samples were taken. After DNA samples, the healthy snow leopards were released and headed up the Hindu Kush Mountains in good condition. The big cats will be tracked by WCS to better understand their behavior and range. So far, the first snow leopard, Pahlawan, has travelled more than 125 kilometers; while the second cat, Khani Wakhai, has travelled more than

153 kilometers.

The veterinary team, including WCS's Dr. Stephane Ostrowski and two Afghan colleagues Dr. Ali Madad and Dr Hafizullah Noori, conducted the tranquilizing process at the capture sites along with Nat Geo WILD's Boone Smith, an expert tracker who traveled to Afghanistan for the project with the Nat Geo WILD film crew.

The work was generously supported by the National Geographic Society, Nat Geo WILD and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

An adult snow leopard stands about two feet at the shoulder and weighs between 60 and 120 pounds. The snow leopard is an alpine rock-climbing specialist with large paws that are ideally adapted to both rocky terrain and deep snow drifts and thick fur to stay warm.

David Lawson, WCS Afghanistan Country Director, said: "These captures are sensational. They are also a real tribute to the knowledge of the local community rangers and the success of our recent camera trapping efforts, which enabled the team to select spots that were known to be frequented by snow leopards."

The range of the snow leopard includes about 2 million square kilometers across 12 nations in Asia from Russia to Nepal. It is the apex predator and a flagship species for one of the last great wilderness regions on earth – the spectacular mountain ranges of Asia, including the Himalaya, Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Pamir, Tien Shan, and Altai ranges.

The entire process was documented by a Nat Geo WILD television crew for a world premiere special Snow Leopards of Afghanistan premiering this December on Nat Geo WILD during the third annual Big Cat Week, an extension of the Cause An Uproar campaign, dedicated to saving the

world's big cats.

Despite survival skills such as spectacular leaping ability and coloring that camouflages them to near invisibility on the rocky alpine slopes of their native habitat, the snow leopard faces threats that are bringing this species closer to extinction. Snow leopards have been categorized as an Endangered Species on the IUCN's Red List since 1972, and the species is listed as endangered by almost all range countries. Despite these listings, snow leopard populations are still thought to be dwindling across most of their range. Some 3,000 to 7,500 individuals are thought to exist.

There are five major threats facing snow leopards in the wild: poaching, especially for the skins but also for the traditional medicinal trade; loss of natural wild prey (mostly wild sheep and goats, but also marmots and smaller prey); retaliatory killing by shepherds and villagers when snow leopards switch to livestock as the only available alternative food source; general disturbance of habitat as people increasingly move into snow leopard ranges; and lack of awareness by local communities and governments of the rapid disappearance of snow leopards and the need for improved enforcement both in and outside protected areas.

Peter Zahler, WCS Deputy Director of Asia Programs, said: "The information garnered from the tagging will assist researchers as they learn more about the range, behavior, movements, and habitat used by snow leopards. This information in turn will help us in our partnership with the Afghan Government and local communities to design protected areas and management strategies to optimize the conservation of this big cat."

WCS works closely with Afghanistan government partners including the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) to find ways to save snow leopards while improving local people's livelihoods.

NEPA Director General Mostapha Zaher said, "History is being made. Snow leopards are indeed magnificent creatures, and we hope that this research will raise awareness and help in preserving Afghanistan's snow leopards and our country's other wonderful wildlife."

Ghani Ghuriani, Afghanistan Deputy Minister for Agriculture Affairs in the Ministry of Agriculture, said: "The snow leopard is an iconic species for our country. Its continued presence in Afghanistan shows that our efforts at improving natural resource management – from rangeland practices to wildlife protection – are succeeding."

While this is the first collaring effort in Afghanistan, WCS supported the first ever radio-collar study of snow leopards in Mongolia's Gobi Altai Mountains in the 1990s under the leadership of Dr. George Schaller. WCS has a long history of working on snow leopard conservation, beginning with Schaller's wildlife surveys on snow leopards and their prey in the Himalaya in the 1970s, resulting in his seminal books "Mountain Monarchs" and "Stones of Silence." Schaller and colleagues have followed up that work with ongoing conservation efforts in China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society