

Olympic mascot calls attention to snow leopards' plight

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When the 2014 Winter Olympics kick off next month in the Russian city of Sochi, attention will focus on thousands of elite athletes, scores of broadcasters and three cuddly animal mascots, including the appealing - but endangered - snow leopard.

But the snow leopard, with its distinctive markings and secretive behavior, has never lived near Sochi, which is in southern Russia, on the Black Sea at the western edge of the Caucasus Mountains. The snow leopard's native range is more than 3,000 miles away, in the remote, mountainous Altai Region of Siberia. And there, the population of native snow leopards has nearly been extirpated by poaching. Recent success in conservation efforts, however, gives scientists reason to be hopeful that the elusive creatures might rebound.

"It's just fantastic that the snow leopard is being featured as the mascot of the Sochi Olympics. The creature does need all the attention it can get. It is extremely endangered throughout its range," said Dr. James P. Gibbs, a conservation biologist at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, N.Y., who has been involved in snow leopard research and [conservation efforts](#) in Russia for the last five years.

Despite the predator's dwindling numbers, collaborative efforts by conservation biologists from the United States and Russia have made some progress. Gibbs works closely with Sergei Spitsyn of the Russian Protected Areas system, Mikhail Paltsyn of WWF-Russia and Jennifer

Caster of The Altai Project.

"Five years ago, I would've said it's hopeless but now we're finding ways to control poaching and provide economic opportunities for desperately poor local herders as alternatives to poaching," said Gibbs.

Poachers target snow leopards because their luxurious pelts can be sold to middlemen and ultimately fetch thousands of dollars in big cities such as Moscow and Beijing. While traditional anti-poaching methods such as patrols and snare removal are still in use, part of the solution to the poaching problem, Gibbs said, is creating economic development opportunities for poor herders so they have options other than poaching.

"If we can create opportunities for local women to sell their handicrafts, they won't have to rely on their husbands' poaching to pay school and medical fees for their children," he said.

Other solutions, he said, can be simple: a \$20 piece of chain-link fencing to cover the ventilation hole in the enclosed corrals where herders keep their sheep at night will keep snow leopards out and avoid lots of conflict. One snow leopard, driven out of higher elevations by a lack of prey because of overhunting, can leap into a corral and destroy a family's livestock in one night.

"That essentially can devastate a family's entire wealth, which might amount to only about \$500. It's gone in a night," Gibbs said.

That means local people often view snow leopards as pests. That perception can be counteracted by ecotourism that focuses on science and brings international visitors - and money - into the region. When local people see that foreigners have traveled a great distance to see the local fauna, Gibbs said, "they see that their backyard and the creatures in it must be fairly special." In turn, the government can come to see the

international significance of animals such as snow leopards.

"We have to find a way to make [snow leopards](#) worth more alive than dead to local people. We all want them; they're wonderful creatures but we don't bear the cost of living with them, so finding a way for local people to live with them without paying the costs is the challenge."

Provided by State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry

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