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Large cats of Kazakhstan: modern condition, problems of preservation and restoration

Alexey Grachev¹, Erik Baydavletov¹, Yuriy Grachev¹, Roman Jashenko¹ And Viktoriya Ilina²

(1 Institute of Zoology CS MES RK; 2Institute of Zoology CAS)

Author: roman.jashenko@zool.kz; ilinaviktoria@mail.ru

The problem of protection of large cats is among the most important problems of preserving the biological diversity of the planet. Of the large cats, only a snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) currently lives in Kazakhstan, and lately the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus ciscaucasica*) has entered the territory from Turkmenistan. In the first half of the XX century, the Turanian (Caspian) tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata*) was completely exterminated in Kazakhstan, and in the mid-XX century the Asian cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus raddei*). In recent years, we carried out studies to clarify the current state of the snow leopard populations showed that its range, covering all the mountain systems of Southern, South-Eastern and Eastern Kazakhstan, has been declining in recent decades, primarily due to peripheral mountain ranges, and the number does not exceed 150 individuals. In recent years, a tiger recovery program has been adopted and is being implemented in Kazakhstan, in places where Turanian tiger has spread. Restoration of the tiger in Kazakhstan is planned by reintroduction of genetically close Amur subspecies (*P. t. altaica*). To ensure the success of the reintroduction program, in 2018, the Ile-Balkhashsky nature reserve was created in the Ile River delta, where active measures are currently being taken to restore ecosystems and to work with local people.

In the western part of Kazakhstan (Ustyurt, Mangyshlak) in recent years leopard raids from neighboring Turkmenistan have become frequent, however, in most cases, animals have been killed. Since 2018, on the territory of the Ustyurt reserve, one leopard specimen is periodically recorded by photo-traps by specialists of the reserve.



The absence of conservation status in Kazakhstan for the leopard makes its protection much more difficult.

The main reasons for the disappearance of large cats were direct extermination, uncontrolled hunting of ungulates (the main food objects) and the development of habitats, which led to their reduction and fragmentation. To preserve and restore large cats, first of all, it is necessary to strengthen measures to counter poaching, improve the network of protected areas, environmental education, expand international cooperation, improve environmental legislation, and develop new approaches to keeping and breeding animals in captivity for reintroduction.

The snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) in the Republic of Kazakhstan is one of the rarest species of animals. The approximate number of this species in the Republic of Kazakhstan is about 120-150 individuals. In this regard, there is a clear need for the development and improvement of regulatory issues related to the preservation of the snow leopard population. Given that the issue of snow leopard conservation is one of the priorities at the global level, the rules of legal regulation are divided into international and national. *Panthera uncia* is included in the Red list of the International Union for conservation of nature (IUCN) with the assignment of the highest security category - Endangered (EN).

Since 1978, the Snow Leopard is listed in the Red Book of the USSR and the Kazakh SSR and is now in the red Book of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The snow leopard is included in Annex I of the Convention on international trade in endangered species of fauna and flora (CITES). It is worth noting that Annex I contain species that can be found in Asia, and the rest of the cat family can be found in Annex II. The difference between species in Annex I and those in Annex II is that commercial trade in species included in this Annex is prohibited (although there are exceptions). International trade in species included in Annex II, are permitted, however, the export and import of these species is carried out only with special permission by CITES, which is issued by the national Administrative authorities of CITES designated by the governments of the countries - participants of the Convention.



At the national level, most issues related to the conservation of the snow leopard are regulated by the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the protection, reproduction and use of wildlife", which regulates the procedure for conducting research and their coordination with the authorized state bodies. In Kazakhstan, there are 15 specially protected natural areas of different ranks, functioning on the basis of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On specially protected natural areas": reserves, national parks and reserves, in the territories of which the detection of a snow leopard is registered. Over the past 12 years, within the area of distribution of the species, 6 national parks have been created in all mountain systems, the territories of 3 reserves previously created have been expanded. This allowed to increase the area of the protected part of the leopard range to about 30% of its total territory within Kazakhstan, which is about 50 000 sq. km.

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