

CAT news

N° 86 | Summer 2026





CATnews is the newsletter of the IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group, a component of the Species Survival Commission SSC of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is published three times a year, in spring, summer, and late autumn. It features original articles and short communications relevant to the conservation of the free living wild cats, including news on the IUCN Red List and Green Status of Species assessments, important ex situ conservation breeding programmes, and from Species Working Groups affiliated with the Cat SG.

The publication of CATnews is made possible through the support of the **Fondation Hans Wilsdorf** and the Friends of the Cat Group. CATnews can be subscribed to by joining the [Friends of the Cat Group](#). It is shipped to all Members and Friends of the Cat Group three times a year.

To join the Friends of the Cat Group, please contact Christine Breitenmoser at ch.breitenmoser@kora.ch

Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome
Send contributions and observations to l.bahaa-el-din@kora.ch

Guidelines for authors are available at www.catsg.org/catnews

Design: Barbara Surber, werk'sdesign gmbh
Layout: Laila Bahaa-el-din and Christine Breitenmoser
Print: Stämpfli AG, Bern, Switzerland
ISSN 1027-2992 © IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

September 2026

The designation of the geographical entities in this publication, and the representation of the material, do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the IUCN concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Editor: Laila Bahaa-el-din
IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group
KORA, Talgut-Zentrum 5, 3063 Ittigen
Switzerland
<l.bahaa-el-din@kora.ch>

Editorial board: Christine Breitenmoser-Würsten
Sugoto Roy
Tadeu De Oliveira
Samantha Nicholson

Associate Editors: Urs Breitenmoser
Juan Reppucci
Sugoto Roy
Maximilian Allen
Yadav Ghimirey
Roland Bürki
Samantha Nicholson

Cover Photo: Adult male black-footed cat on
Benfontein Nature Reserve,
Northern Cape Province, close to
Kimberley, South Africa
Photo: Alexander Sliwa

PETER ZAHLER¹, MELISSA CAVARETTA¹, ANNA CHANEY¹ AND MAGGIE MORSE¹

Association of Zoos & Aquariums, SAFE Snow Leopard Program

The snow leopard *Panthera uncia* is a top predator of Asia's high mountains. It is found from southern Russia through Mongolia, China, parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bhutan, and Nepal. Enigmatic, well-camouflaged, secretive, and naturally living at low densities in incredibly rugged terrain, it is arguably the least well-known big cat in the world. This has led to numerous controversies, including its taxonomy, shifting from *Panthera* to *Uncia* and back (Kitchener et al. 2024). Its status has also been controversial, as after many years being listed by IUCN as Endangered, it is now considered Vulnerable (McCarthy et al. 2017). Its global population size has also been debated, as some have argued that it could be below 4,000 (e.g., Snow Leopard Working Secretariat 2013). Based on recent country-wide assessments, many of them that follow the nearly range-wide Population Assessment of the World's Snow Leopards or PAWS guidelines (Sharma et al. 2020), the snow leopard's population stands at somewhere between 7,135 and 10,395 (Snow Leopard Reports 2026). This is likely to be almost entirely because of vastly improved search efforts and methodologies, such as expanded and improved camera trap survey designs (Fig. 1), rather than an increase in numbers. Data are not yet sufficient to

allow trends to be accurately determined, except in a few specific locations, but McCarthy et al. (2017) assessed the species as being in decline.

Threats to snow leopards include retaliatory killing by transhumant pastoralists who herd livestock in the mountains, as well as poaching for furs and loss of prey. Lesser but potentially growing threats include disease (both for snow leopards and for their prey), resource extraction, habitat degradation, climate change, and linear barriers such as roads and border fences (McCarthy et al. 2017, McCarthy & Mallon 2024).

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Species Survival Plan (SSP) reflects a long-standing effort to maintain stability and genetic diversity in ex-situ populations of snow leopards. Today this population comprises 105 individuals distributed across 49 facilities, with a target population size of 115 to support long term sustainability (Tetzloff et al. 2025). Earlier studbook records document a broadly distributed ex-situ population across numerous institutions, forming the foundation for current coordinated population management. The SSP population has relatively high genetic diversity (94.8%) and is descended from 54 founders (Tetzloff et al. 2025). However, despite these strengths, the



Fig. 2. A snow leopard rests on its rocky exhibit habitat (Photo ZNE).

population has experienced a slight recent decline (ca. 0.975) and exhibits inconsistent recruitment of younger breeding individuals, suggesting potential challenges (Tetzloff et al. 2025 ; Fig. 2).

AZA SAFE (Saving Animals From Extinction) was initiated in 2014 to help harness and focus the power of its over 250 accredited member institutions to achieve in situ conservation. These institutions have not only mobilised over \$2 billion in conservation funding since that time, but as zoos and aquariums, they also are able to reach over 330 million visitors and other individuals every year with messages about threatened species, the importance of wildlife conservation, and actions being taken to protect and recover wild populations (AZA 2024).

The AZA SAFE Snow Leopard Program was initiated in 2025 to support field conservation of snow leopards in the wild. The SAFE Program is designed around fulfilling the conservation strategies first outlined in the various Snow Leopard Strategy Plans and then by the Global Snow Leopard & Ecosystem Protection Program or GSLEP (Sharma et al. 2024), an alliance of the 12 range countries for snow leopards. The SAFE Program plan of work is implemented primarily through its two field partners, Snow Leopard Trust and Snow Leopard Conservancy. Some AZA partner institutions also implement their own snow leopard field work, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society with field programmes in Mongolia and Afghanistan, and Zoo New England with a field programme in northern Pakistan while also managing the Sabin Snow Leopard Grants Program.

The SAFE Snow Leopard Program has three main objectives. The first is to empower communities in snow leopard landscapes to better coexist with snow leopards, who present a threat to livelihoods through predation on livestock. This is done through various tools to minimise livestock depredation, while also supporting community livelihood initiatives



Fig. 1. Snow leopard captured by camera trap in the Spiti Valley region of India (Photo SLT).

that are linked to conservation of snow leopards and their wild prey. Examples of conflict resolution methods include predator-proofing corrals, various predator deterrence methods, livestock insurance programmes, and emergency response training. Satellite collars also allow researchers to better understand snow leopard movement and when and where the cats may come into conflict with herders (Figs 3, 4). There is also a 'one-health' component involving dog vaccination efforts for diseases such as rabies and canine distemper that can impact snow leopard and human health. Livestock vaccination efforts are also being implemented, which improves livelihood while also lessening the likelihood of spill-over to wild caprids that are the main prey for snow leopards.

The second objective is to cultivate public awareness and engagement around snow leopard conservation. Zoos are especially well placed to do this, especially those institutions that have snow leopards in their care, via signage, keeper and volunteer talks on site for visitors, and via their marketing and communication departments through social and other media outlets. The third objective is to build SAFE Program capacity and strategic planning. A major part of this objective is improving fund raising to support field work. A second part of this is to increase participation (especially those AZA institutions not yet partnering with the SAFE Program) and also increase connectivity among partner organizations so they can participate and provide input through various meetings and conferences that occur annually, thus creating a more interconnected and effective snow leopard conservation community.

The SAFE Snow Leopard Program Plan was completed in 2025 and covers a three-year period through 2028. It can be accessed here: <https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/sf2025-2028snleofpp.pdf>

References

- AZA. 2024. Annual Report on Conservation and Science Highlights. Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Silver Springs, MD, 26 pp.
- Kitchener AC, Driscoll CA & Yamaguchi N. 2024. What is a snow leopard? Taxonomy, morphology, and phylogeny. *In* Snow leopards (2nd Edition). McCarthy T & Mallon D (Eds). Elsevier Publishing, NY, 3–11.
- McCarthy T & Mallon D. (Eds). 2024. Snow leopards (2nd Edition). Elsevier Publishing, NY, 665 pp.
- McCarthy T, Mallon D, Jackson R, Zahler P & McCarthy K. 2017. *Panthera uncia*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2017: e.T22732A50664030. Accessed on 24 June 2026.



Fig. 3. Buren Nyam applying a satellite collar to an immobilised snow leopard in the Tost Mountains of Mongolia (Photo SLT)

Sharma K, Borchers D, Mackenzie D, Durbach I, Sutherland JN, Lovari S, ... & Misha C. 2020. Guidelines for estimating snow leopard abundance and distribution using a combination of spatial capture-recapture and occupancy models. Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program; Global Environment Facility, United Nations Development Program and Snow Leopard Trust. 54 pp.

Sharma K, Alexander JS, Zakhareka A, Kochoorov C, Rutherford B, Varma K, ... & Murali R. 2024. The Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Plan. *In* Snow leopards (2nd Edition). McCarthy T. & Mallon D. (Eds). Elsevier Publishing, NY, pp. 634–646.

Snow Leopard Reports. 2026. The Status of Snow Leopards across High Asia. Snow Leopard Reports 5, 1–103.

Snow Leopard Working Secretariat. 2013. Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program. Snow Leopard Working Secretariat, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Tetzloff J, Koscielny L & Lynch C. 2025. AZA Species Survival Plan® Population Analysis and Breeding and Transfer Plan for Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*). AZA Population Management Center, Chicago, Illinois.

¹ SAFE Snow Leopard steering committee
*pzahler@zooneewengland.org

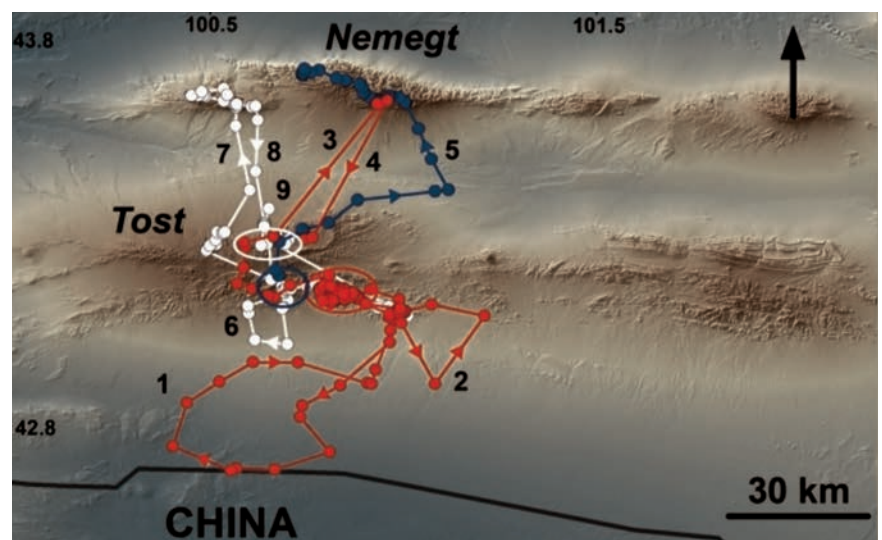


Fig. 4. Map of movement for three collared snow leopards in Gobi-Altai, Mongolia, showing cats crossing open desert between mountains and being blocked by a border fence (Photo SLT).