



The NABU's Snow Leopard Conservation Programme in Kyrgyzstan

From the anti-poaching unit "Gruppa Bars" to the Global Snow Leopard Conservation Forum



The snow leopard in Kyrgyzstan

The snow leopard's distribution area is approximately 1,5 million square kilometres large and extends from Mongolia to Russia and China to Pakistan. Kyrgyzstan was once home to the species' second largest population in the world. In the 1970s and 1980s, the trapping and export of wild animals was officially organized by the Soviet national zoo combine. Kyrgyzstan supplied approximately 40 snow leopards annually, which the central office in Moscow sold to interested zoos worldwide for \$ 50 per animal. With the fall of the Soviet Union, many official wildlife trappers were put out of work. At the same time, almost all major sectors of the economy collapsed. Some Kyrgyzstanis tried to secure an income with poaching and sold snow leopards and their furs, because a fur alone guaranteed profits equalling several annual incomes. In this way, the number of snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan diminished from once 1,300 animals to between 150 and 500 animals (IUCN/McCarthy 2003). The NABU currently assumes approximately 250 snow leopards to be alive in Kyrgyzstan. Exact data on the current size of the snow leopard population is not available, because the large cats live in remote areas that are spread out across twelve states. Scientific estimates assume that worldwide only 4,000 to 6,600 snow leopards still live in wilderness. Moreover, approximately 600 registered animals are kept in zoological gardens.

Milestones of the NABU's commitment to the protection of the snow leopard

The snow leopard's dramatic situation in Kyrgyzstan was reason enough for the NABU to quickly initiate an ambitious project to save the species and its habitat.

- In 1998, the country's first UNESCO biosphere reserve was established. The project was realised by the NABU following a long standing partnership with the German Society for International Cooperation (formerly German Society for Technical Cooperation). The 44,000 square kilometres large Issyk-Kul biosphere reserve is approximately as large as Switzerland and is the largest in the northern hemisphere. It also protects the snow leopard's habitat in the high mountain valleys.

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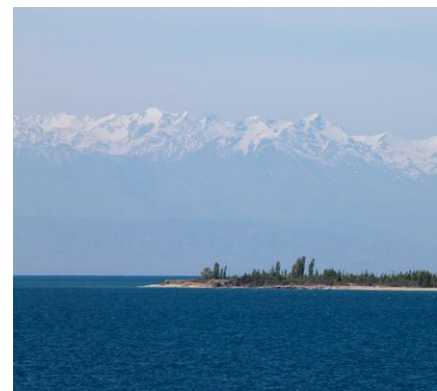
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Covering an area of 6,236 square kilometres, Lake Issyk-Kul is the world's second-largest mountain lake.

- In 1999, the NABU founded its unique conservation project in cooperation with the Kyrgyz Government and established the anti-poaching unit "Gruppa Bars" ("Group Snow Leopard"). Its achievements: 200 poachers have been permanently stopped, and seven living snow leopards as well as hundreds of traps, weapons and snow leopard skins have been confiscated. Thus, the NABU has already contributed to a significant decline in poaching in Kyrgyzstan. Many of the poachers were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.
- In 2000, the first snow leopard was confiscated. Djamila had been heavily injured by poachers and was flown to Germany to the Lüneburger Heath Wildlife Park. Today, she lives in Zurich Zoo, where she is integrated into the European Endangered Species Programme.
- In 2001, the well-known Kyrgyz writer Aitmatov Genghis became patron of the project.
- On September 6th, 2001, the NABU and the Kyrgyz Government signed the first comprehensive cooperation agreement on the conservation of the snow leopard. In 2011, this agreement was extended for a further ten years.
- In 2002, the NABU established its wildlife sanctuary "Snow Leopard" at Lake Issyk-Kul. It is the world's largest outdoor enclosure for snow leopards and currently home to three snow leopards that were injured by poachers and therefore cannot be returned to the wild. In August 2011, Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbajewa visited the snow leopard rehabilitation centre.
- In 2004, the first NABU snow leopard adoption was signed. Until today, 1,700 snow leopard friends have become sponsors of the project in Kyrgyzstan.
- In 2008, the NABU acquired its office property in Bishkek, in which confiscated animals can be temporarily accommodated.
- In 2009, the NABU was able to win famous German actress Marion Eggert as a patron of the project.
- In 2010, the NABU freed 23 animals from the private zoo of ousted Kyrgyz President Bakiyev, among them one snow leopard.
- In 2010, the branch of the German NABU e.V. in Kyrgyzstan (formerly the NABU Project Office Central Asia) was opened.
- In 2011, the NABU submitted a proposal to organize the global forum for the conservation of snow leopards to the Kyrgyz President Rosa Otunbajeva. On this occasion, NABU chief executive officer Leif Miller and NABU vice president Thomas Tennhardt met with the Kyrgyz President, who pledged to support the NABU's initiative to organise the global snow leopard forum: "With this high-level forum, we hope to initiate a number of international projects for the conservation of the snow leopard, and to make a further contribution to the conservation of biodiversity," Otunbajeva said.
- In 2011, the NABU presented its "Strategy for the Protection of Snow Leopards in the Kyrgyz Republic". Active preparations for the Global Snow Leopard Conservation Forum began in 2012, when World Bank president Robert Zoellick announced his support for the Forum. The NABU is an active member of the Forum's organizing committee, which has been confirmed by the Kyrgyz Deputy Prime Minister. Thus, the NABU participates in all preparatory conferences in Bishkek, New Delhi, Bangkok and Moscow, and financially supports the organisation of the conferences.
- On July 5th, 2013, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev reaffirmed Kyrgyzstan's conservation efforts: "Who shoots at snow leopards, shoots at Kyrgyzstan", Atambayev said.
- Since January 2013, the NABU has been realising a cross-border nature conservation project in the Northern Tian Shan together with Kyrgyz and Kazakh



Starved and heavily injured, snow leopard Djamila was saved from the hands of poachers.



The snow leopard rehabilitation centre is home to three injured snow leopards.

project partners and with the support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

- In 2013, the NABU was able to install camera traps in the Tian Shan Mountains, which soon afterwards recorded their first pictures of snow leopards.
- The Global Snow Leopard Conservation Forum will be held in Bishkek on October 22nd and 23rd, 2013. For the first time, the heads of state of all twelve distribution countries will sign a global action plan for the conservation of the snow leopard. The NABU proposes that the UN declare the year 2015 the year of the snow leopard.

What do we want to achieve?

The NABU's goal is to double the number of snow leopards living in Kyrgyzstan within the next ten years and to reach a population of approximately 500 animals. For this, poaching has to be fully stopped, and further conservation areas need to be established. Communication between existing conservation areas as well as their management must be improved. Cross-border cooperation with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan also needs to be intensified.

Establishing alternative and sustainable sources of income and improving the living conditions of the population in Central Asia's characteristically rural mountain regions are effective anti-poaching strategies. Both are a particular focus of the NABU's work in Kyrgyzstan and will be discussed as important issues at the Global Snow Leopard Conservation Forum. The strategies include establishing educational and nature-based tourism as alternative sources of income, making possible a more efficient use of limited resources such as firewood and drinking water and improving local infrastructure. Educational programmes and identity-forming measures to strengthen village communities can also be developed further. Because public nature conservation authorities are often overburdened due to their limited financial resources, the NABU relies on the concept of private conservation areas, which are to develop corresponding environmental education programmes in cooperation with the local population.

The protection of snow leopards can only be successful permanently if our efforts are supported by the population. Therefore, our work primarily focuses on schools. The NABU's lectures with photos, films and practical examples spark both teachers' and pupils' enthusiasm. In half of the schools, our rangers are the first to address the importance of nature and animal conservation. For their educational work, employees also visit regions that are difficult to reach. There, in remote villages and small towns, they hold presentations on nature conservation to the population.

Our local environmental conservation work is supported by our NGO partner NABS Kyrgyzstan. The organisation is considered an important association for nature and wildlife conservation in the country and is the Kyrgyz affiliate of BirdLife International. For the Kyrgyz Government, the association conducts the monitoring of animal and plant species for the compilation of the national Red List. Besides its political activities, the association also advocates environmental education programmes and the establishment of conservation areas.



A snow leopard was caught on one of 18 camera traps in the Tien Shan, only weeks after they had been installed.



The employees travel rural regions and teach children about native animals and about how to protect them.



Survival threats

Illegal fur trapping has substantially reduced the snow leopard population. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has created a high demand for snow leopard bones. In addition, the big cat is tracked because it occasionally kills livestock. The snow leopard is protected in all states of its distribution area. But poaching endangers the species to this day. It is further threatened by humans hunting its natural prey and a loss of habitat. In large parts of its distribution area, the snow leopard has become very rare today. The IUCN lists the species as „critically endangered“.