

## **Snow leopards photographed for first time in Kyrgyz Ala-Too Range**

***Images shared by zoo's conservation partner proves elusive species  
living in nature reserve***



SEATTLE - Researchers have captured the elusive snow leopard on camera in Shamsy, Kyrgyzstan, the first evidence that a bold strategy to transform a former hunting reserve into a protected wildlife preserve is working.

Through a new, innovative conservation program piloted by Seattle-based Snow Leopard Trust, Woodland Park Zoo, Snow Leopard Foundation Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz Department of Hunting and Natural Resource Management, the 100 square mile area of Shamsy in Kyrgyzstan's northern Tian Shan mountains was converted from a hunting concession to a co-managed nature reserve in 2015. Shamsy is home to ibex and seasonal populations of argali and wolves. It lies within a large snow leopard landscape, and has the potential to become a key part of the home ranges of several of these endangered cats if its wild ungulate population can be increased.

"It took vision and gumption from the Kyrgyzstan government, Snow Leopard Trust and local community to take on the co-management of a former hunting concession as a nature reserve. This kind of innovative strategy is exactly what is needed to secure additional habitat for wildlife," said Fred Koontz, PhD, vice president of field conservation at Woodland Park Zoo. "We are delighted to be partnering on this project—and I suspect that the snow leopards are also!"

"We knew that this area had great potential as a snow leopard habitat. We've partnered with the government to establish and manage the Shamsy Wildlife Sanctuary when the opportunity presented itself," says Kuban Jumabai uulu, director of the Snow Leopard Foundation Kyrgyzstan, and country program manager for the Snow Leopard Trust. "Earlier this year, we had found snow leopard tracks and scratch marks on several ridgelines in Shamsy. Now, these pictures prove the cat's presence in the Sanctuary."

Snow leopards were photographed at five different locations within Shamsy Sanctuary in a total of 10 encounters. The photos are the first photographic evidence of snow leopards in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too Range ("Snowy Mountains" in Kyrgyz), a mountain range that is part of the North Tian Shan Mountains and extends some 200 miles from east to west.

The cameras had been set up by the Sanctuary's three rangers and a team of volunteers from India, following a study design and training from Snow Leopard Trust scientists.

The snow leopard photos are not only evidence of this cat's presence in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too range, but are also an encouraging sign for an innovative new conservation approach that is being tested in Shamshy: the co-management of a former hunting concession as a nature reserve by conservationists, the government and the local community.

Commercial big game hunting, often referred to as “trophy hunting,” is both a tradition and a revenue source for many countries around the world, and a hotly debated topic in conservation circles. The practice usually involves governments or private land owners renting certain areas—sometimes termed “concessions”—to hunting companies, who then sell licenses to shoot specific species such as ibex or argali to hunters—often foreigners.

Shamshy, some 50 miles southeast of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, used to be such a hunting concession under the administration of the Kyrgyz government's Department of Rational Use of Natural Resources (formerly the Hunting Department).

“It is our duty to manage the natural resources of the Kyrgyz Republic sustainably,” says Musaev Almaz, the Department's director. “This means finding a healthy balance between exploitation and conservation. This initiative in Shamshy is one such effort towards conserving wildlife populations through alternate models of managing natural areas through co-management.”

As part of the agreement, Almaz's Department has forfeited the cost of the hunting licenses for ibex that could have been sold in this area had it been rented out to a commercial outfit.

The Snow Leopard Trust and Snow Leopard Foundation Kyrgyzstan have in turn agreed to prepare a management plan with community based approach for conservation in the area and also monitor trends in its wildlife populations over the next years.

On its own, the area is too small to host a sizeable snow leopard population, but it could serve as a core zone of a larger habitat. “With proper protection and management, Shamshy's ibex population could double or even triple in the next 10 years, so it could become an important area for the snow leopard population of the Kyrgyz Ala-Too Range,” says Charu Mishra, the Snow Leopard Trust's science & conservation director.

“We're thrilled to see that the snow leopard is already there in Shamshy,” Almaz says. “This cat is an important part of our national culture and heritage, and we're committed to securing its future.”

The Kyrgyz Republic has indeed taken on a key role in the worldwide effort to protect the snow leopard. Under the leadership of President Almazbek Atambaev, the

Central Asian nation brought all 12 snow leopard range countries to the table for the first-ever Global Snow Leopard Conservation Forum held in Bishkek in 2013. This initiative has resulted in the Global Snow Leopard & Ecosystem Protection Plan, an ambitious program with a goal to secure 23 snow leopard landscapes across the cat's range by 2020.

Under this plan, various conservation initiatives are being piloted. Co-management of reserves and protected areas to improve availability of critical wildlife habitats and conservation education is one of them.

In 2017, President Atambaev will host a Global Summit on Snow Leopard Conservation to further move this plan forward.

Accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, award-winning Woodland Park Zoo is famed for pioneering naturalistic exhibits and setting international standards for zoos in animal care, conservation and education programs. Woodland Park Zoo is helping to save animals and their habitats in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. By inspiring people to care and act, Woodland Park Zoo is making a difference in our planet's future. For more information, visit [www.zoo.org](http://www.zoo.org).

#### **Snow Leopard Foundation in Kyrgyzstan**

Leading the conservation efforts for the endangered snow leopard in Kyrgyzstan, the Snow Leopard Foundation partners with international organizations such as the Snow Leopard Trust to better understand and protect this cat in this key range country.

#### **Snow Leopard Trust**

The Snow Leopard Trust, based in Seattle, WA, is a world leader in conservation of the endangered snow leopard, conducting pioneering research and partnering with communities as well as authorities in snow leopard habitat to protect the cat. [www.snowleopard.org](http://www.snowleopard.org)

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