

2005 Whitley Gold Award Winner

Also Winner of The Whitley Award sponsored by HSBC

Charudutt Mishra, India

People and snow leopards: wildlife conservation in the Himalayan high altitudes

The issue:

The Himalayan high altitudes have a unique diversity of wildlife remarkably adapted to the cold, vertical landscape. Amongst this wildlife is the endangered snow leopard, an almost mythical cat that has become an international flagship species for wildlife conservation. There are believed to be only 5,000 snow leopards in 12 countries left in the wild, with less than 1,000 remaining in India. There are equally fascinating albeit less celebrated species – Tibetan argali, bharal, ibex, kiang, urial, wolf, and marmot – that share the habitat of the snow leopard, alongside many endemic varieties of flora of high medicinal value.

For several millennia, pastoral peoples have also inhabited the Indian Himalayas, from the Changpa of Ladakh in the West, to the Monpa of Arunachal in the East. Originally surviving on a simple subsistence existence, today modern pressures are leading many communities to pursue excessive livestock grazing and wildlife hunting. At the same time, indigenous people continue to bear the brunt of conflict with wildlife, suffering livestock losses to the snow leopard.

As more livestock are introduced and out-compete wild herbivores, snow leopards become more likely to kill domestic animals as their natural prey becomes scarce. Snow leopards are protected throughout their range and international trade is banned by their listing on Appendix I of the CITES. Despite this, because the loss of even a



single yak or sheep represents a real economic hardship, herders often retaliate by trapping, poisoning, or shooting snow leopards.

The project work:

Winner of the 2005 Whitley Gold Award, Dr. Charudutt Mishra (pictured left) is Director and Founder Trustee of 'Nature Conservation Foundation', an NGO established in 1996 to promote wildlife conservation in India. Working with the International Snow Leopard Trust in key locations across the Himalayas where India borders Nepal and Tibet, Charu and his team are addressing the twin problems of declining wild prey and human disturbance which threaten snow leopard survival. Supported by a strong research program, he is working directly with local people to resolve conflict with snow leopards, creating livestock-free 'village wildlife reserves' on common land and improving herding practices for the benefit of both wildlife and people. He has also developed a simple insurance scheme to compensate members of the community whose livestock are preyed upon by these big cats. Charu first introduced the scheme in the remote village of Kibber. The work has

resulted in an increase in wild prey populations, a decline in livestock losses to the snow leopard, and has reduced snow leopard persecution by generating an interest in conservation amongst local people. Charu has now established strong community based conservation programs with several villages in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, and in 2005 expanded the program to Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir State.

The future:

Together with NCF, Charu is consolidating conservation approaches to the region by working with the government to formulate a participatory National Conservation Policy for high altitude wildlife, complemented by a strong education programme. Called 'Project Snow Leopard', this comprehensive strategy for high-altitude conservation utilises the snow leopard as a flagship species, and is being developed with the Forest Departments of India's five Himalayan states. "We are translating the lessons learned from our efforts in Kibber and elsewhere in the Himalayas into a larger management program for the mountains," says Charu. "The response of local wildlife agencies has been truly heartening."

Snow Leopard Image: Dennis Conner

WFN

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Leader Profile:

Charu grew up in the Indian metropolis of Delhi, where his mother encouraged his interest in nature. He studied at the Wildlife Institute of India, and later earned a PhD in Ecology and Natural Resource Conservation from the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands. Director of NCF since 2002, he was involved in UN post-conflict wildlife assessments in Afghanistan, and was a member of a historic expedition in 2003 to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh that discovered a new species of monkey, the Arunachal macaque.

Charu lives in the southern Indian city of Mysore with his wife Aparajita, but each year spends many months in the mountains studying wildlife. Spending time in small villages within snow leopard territory is important; as a result, Charu has earned the trust of many mountain communities, enabling him to pursue local conservation programs more effectively.

Key Threats & Objectives

Threats

- **Habitat degradation** – As humans push ever further into mountainous areas with their livestock, the snow leopard’s habitat is being degraded and fragmented.
- **Decline in wild prey** – Overgrazing damages the fragile mountain grassland, leaving less food for the wild herbivores that are the snow leopard’s main prey. Hunting for meat and trophies is also depleting prey populations.
- **Illegal hunting** – snow leopards themselves are targeted in retaliation for livestock losses. Their fur and body parts are also valuable on the black market, believed in Chinese culture to hold medicinal properties.

Objectives

- **A National Conservation Policy** – for high altitude wildlife, informed by NCF’s research and experience of interactions between people and wildlife.
- **Expansion of community-based conservation programmes** – across the



snow leopard range, incorporating workshops and education.

- **Greater protection for wildlife from illegal hunting** – by maintaining a sustained conservation presence and working to change long-term attitudes.
- **Recovery of wild prey populations** – through improvements in livestock management and long-term monitoring.
- **Strengthening of India’s high altitude reserve network** – by working with state governments to establish Arunachal Pradesh’s first high altitude reserve.



Collaborative Organisations

The International Snow Leopard Trust
The State Wildlife Departments of India’s five Himalayan states

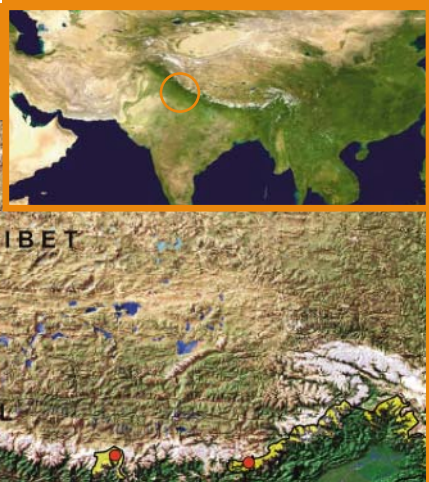
Project Team

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Associate Director
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- Tsewang Namgail**
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- Sumanta Bagchi**
Conservationist and PhD student
- Sushil Dorje**
Field Programme Co-ordinator
- Rakhee Karumbaya**
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Project website

www.ncf-india.org

Location of Project
Place/ Town Across village communities in the high Himalaya of Northern India
Region/s Primarily Ladakh, Spiti, Tawang and West Kameng
State/s Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh
Country India



- Sites for community based conservation
- Project Snow Leopard: Region of impact
- India international boundary



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