SNOW LEOPARD SURVEY PROJECT

In November of 1985, a nine-month survey of the snow leopard and its associated prey in north western India began under the auspices of W.I.I. The project has been organized as a cooperative international effort among the Government of India (WII), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and the International Snow Leopard Trust. Dr. J.L. Fox, Research Director of the Snow Leopard Trust, is accompanying the field survey team, which comprises three research scholars from W.I.I. - S.P. Sinha (Zoologist), R.S. Chundawat (Botanist), and P.K. Das (Social Scientist). The project is guided by the Director W.I.I. and mountaineering expert Mr. Alok Chandola, is a consultant.

The research team initiated field work in the trans-Himalayan mountains of Ladakh and continued surveys in this region until the end of March. In April the survey location was changed to the south side of the Himalayas, first in north-western Uttar Pradesh, and then in May to northern Himachal Pradesh. During June the team will continue moving north over the main crest of the Himalayas, back into Ladakh, and complete the field work there in mid-July.

Data are being collected on snow leopard presence, conservation status, habitat use, and interaction with human activities. Similar information gathering on the main prey species, blue sheep and ibex, along with the snow leopard data, represent the main thrust of the surveys. However, corollary information on other mammalian species in the survey areas is collected whenever possible. With regard to main activities within snow leopard range, data are being collected on local human populations, land use, and attitude towards wildlife.

To date, the research team has encountered evidence of snow leopard presence in each of the general survey locations, although the Markha Valley region south of Heli in Ladakh has produced the most. Substantial data has been collected on snow leopard habitat use, based on tracking of the leopards (primarly in snow). Two sightings have been made, of different individuals, both in the Markha Valley region, including some 30 hours of visual observation. Some 250 ibex and 400 blue sheep have been observed and appropriate habitat use information collected. The snow leopard is an important predator on livestock in Ladakh. However, because in many cases the villagers are able to retrieve the kill from

the leopard, this predation is tolerated without great concern – except when the leopard kills many animals at once, which occurs occassionally when one gets into a pen inside a house. Such instances often provide an opportunity to kill the snow leopard, and represent an important conservation problem with regard to this endangered species.

The survey work will terminate in July this year, but the project will continue with selection of a site for more intensive studies on the snow leopard and associated species (probably Markha Valley) to begin next year. In addition, other conservation or wildlife research questions raised as a result of these surveys will provide part of the foundation for establishing research priorities of the currently emerging Alpine Ecology Center of the Wildlife Institute. Most of the sites surveyed are within either established or proposed National Parks and reserves, and the survey results will be used in formulating management plans for these areas.

Results of the snow leopard surveys will be presented at the Fifth International Snow Leopard Symposium to be held in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, from 10-15 October of 1986.

J.L. FOX

A WALK TO PANGE

On 22nd April I had the chance to walk from Ziro (5000') to Pange (6300') looking for large mammals and their evidences of their presence. Ziro is the headquarters of Lower Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh and Pange, which is 13 km from Ziro through a short cut, is an abandoned forest range headquarters. My original programme was to stay in Pange for two nights and explore the Tale valley (8000') which is 15 km from Pange. But due to unforeseen developments I could undertake only the walk.

The Pange – Tale valley area is unique in having the blue pine (Pinus excelsa) at lower elevations (5000 – 6000') and broad leaved trees at higher elevations (8000'). According to Mr. J.K. Mehta, Chief Wildlife Warden of Arunachal Pradesh, Tale valley is one potential area where takin (a goat-antelope and its scientific name is Budorcas taxicolor) and wild mythun (said to be a hybrid between gaur and domestic cattle, but some believe that mythun is a different type of gaur) could be found. With hopes of seeing Red jungle fowl, pheasants, hornbills, Malayan giant squirrel, capped langur and tracks of barking deer and sambar, I walked 24 km in total along a newly built forest road which runs through excellent forests with dense bamboo and tall moss covered trees. I was totally disappointed with what I saw, which were numerous tracks of tame mythuns and a tame mythun itself coming out of an abandoned shelter built by the road workers.

One spoor near Pange looked like that of a porcupine to me, but porcupine droppings were conspicuously absent all through my trek. However, scats of one species of lesser cat, possibly of leopard cat, were common all along. I was surprised to learn that inspite of the abundant bamboo and perennial streams elephants have never lived in Pange – Tale valley area. It is well known that tribals in Arunachal are very fond of hunting and still hunt all animals that are edible to them. This may explain the paucity of wildlife I saw in this tract.

A.J.T. JOHNSINGH