

Project Update: February 2003

In early 2003, Project Snow Leopard was awarded a Continuation Grant by the Whitley Laing Foundation to assist its development. Here is Shafqat's update on how PSL is going....

The project is being implemented in Skoyo valley in the Baltistan region of Northern Pakistan. Since its inception, PSL has made significant progress towards the goals that it set out to achieve. Since 1999, PSL has carried out snow leopard status and distribution surveys and published the results in a scientific journal (*Oryx*, vol 37, no 1), and established a community based insurance scheme to help reduce the retaliatory killings of the snow leopard by angry farmers.

One of the main aims of PSL is to instil snow leopard conservation friendly behaviour among the members of the participating community. The project believes that this can be achieved through creating the right mix of incentives for the community members. Through its insurance scheme and ecotourism activities, PSL has been able to institutionalize an incentive structure conducive to snow leopard conservation friendly behaviour, and thus bring about a discernible behavioural change among the villagers. Our annual biological and attitudinal surveys show that our two main goals, a stable snow leopard population and a positive change in the attitude of the people toward the snow leopard, are being achieved. Before the initiation of the project, the villagers frequently complained about the presence of snow leopard in their valley and requested the local wildlife department staff and conservation NGOs such as WWF and IUCN to take "their" snow leopard away. PSL alleviated the farmers' hardship and created a flow of real economic benefits to the community, since then the snow leopard has become "our" snow leopard for the community. This change in attitude from rejection to ownership over the snow leopard is attributed to the success of the PSL.

Since the start of PSL seven claims for livestock lost to the snow leopard have been filed to the insurance scheme. They all were approved and compensation was paid out. During the same period snow leopard trekking expeditions were organised for 5 groups totalling 14 people. We estimate that PSL might be contributing towards protection of at least one snow leopard annually from retaliatory killings. Estimates of numbers of snow leopard killed in retaliation to predation in the Northern Areas range somewhere from 5 – 10.

PSL has become well known in communities adjacent to the current project valley as well as among the conservation community, locally, nationally and internationally. PSL has been approached by adjacent communities on a number of occasions, expressing their desire to establish a PSL style project in their area. The PSL staff has been surprised to find out how much the members of the adjacent communities knew about the design and the basic methodology of its project. This "awareness" about the PSL among people with whom the project has had no direct contact indicates two things: first, the community of Skoyo understands the project well enough to explain to members from other villages. Second, community members from adjacent villages have a genuine interest in the scheme which is reflected by the fact that they have asked members of Skoyo community about the scheme and bothered to travel down to Skardu, a town 60 km from their villages, to talk to PSL staff.

PSL has been approached by other conservation NGOs interested in collaborating with us. The community members in Skoyo show great appreciation and respect for the project and its staff. They very candidly tell us that PSL is the first project that actually balances the needs of the people with conservation imperatives.

As far as sustainability of the project is concerned, it is somewhat vulnerable to the fluctuating tourism market in Pakistan. Perceived or real security issues, arising from political instability can have (and does have) adverse effects on sustainability. Since 1999, we have had a steady increase in the number of tourists each year. With the event of 9/11, however, all tourism activity has come to a halt in Pakistan. We hope that the situation improves in the mid to long run for us to continue our mission of conservation of this beautiful species.

