



Panthera Q&A: The Snow Leopard's IUCN Red List Status Change from 'Endangered' to 'Vulnerable'

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What is the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species?

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) maintains a ['Red List of Threatened Species'](#) that serves as the world's most comprehensive inventory on the global conservation status of animal, fungi and plant species. It is the globally accepted, international standard for assessing species extinction risk.

How often are designations for wildlife species assessed by the IUCN?

Species are re-assessed every 5-10 years to determine any change in status, either positive or negative. The snow leopard's status was assessed in 1986, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2002 and 2008. In each case it was classified as Endangered.

Why was there a recent change in snow leopard status?

On September 14, 2017, the IUCN announced that the snow leopard's Red List status should change from 'Endangered' to 'Vulnerable.' There are very specific rules that must be followed to assess a species' conservation status. A continuation of the Endangered classification for the snow leopard would have required two criteria to be met:

- 1) A global population consisting of fewer than 2,500 mature adults, and
- 2) An ongoing decline of 20% over 16 years.

The expert assessor team, using the best information available, determined that the snow leopard currently meets neither criteria. Although recent studies suggest that snow leopard numbers are likely higher than previously thought, the assessment team took an exceptionally precautionary approach, including using the lowest widely accepted global population size (4,000) when determining if the Endangered threshold could be met.

Further, the IUCN has determined that an error in methodology used to estimate population size in the previous assessment (2008), means that the snow leopard should have been listed as Vulnerable at that time.

What does this change in status mean?

"Vulnerable" is an improvement over the category of "Endangered." However, "Vulnerable" status does not mean "safe"—this category definition states that the species still faces 'a high risk of extinction in the wild' and implies that the species is still declining (just not at the rate previously thought), due to human-snow leopard conflict, habitat loss and fragmentation and poaching for the illegal wildlife trade.

Who determined the new snow leopard status?

The decision was based on an assessment conducted by a team of five respected international experts on the snow leopard from three different conservation organizations - Panthera, the global wild cat conservation organization, Snow Leopard Conservancy, and the Wildlife Conservation Society – along with academia. The assessment was reviewed and approved by eight international felid and Red List assessment experts, the IUCN Global Mammal Assessment team and central Red List Unit.

It has been reported that there may be more snow leopards than previously thought. Are higher population figures valid?

A number of recent studies using more scientifically robust methods than in the past, suggest that snow leopard numbers are likely higher, perhaps much higher, than previously thought. Many of these findings are [published in a new comprehensive book](#) on the state of the species co-edited by Panthera Snow Leopard Program's Executive Director, Dr. Tom McCarthy, with contributions from nearly 200 experts.

While encouraging news, those involved in the studies warn that our understanding of overall snow leopard numbers is still quite limited and much effort is needed to refine the estimates.

How did the higher snow leopard population estimates impact the recent assessment?

The new higher snow leopard population estimates and the change in Red List status have absolutely NO relationship. The higher population estimates were NOT used in the assessment that determined the snow leopard should be classified as Vulnerable. The IUCN assessment team took an exceptionally precautionary approach using the lowest widely accepted global snow leopard population size—4,000—when determining if the Endangered criteria could be met.

Why has the snow leopard's status improved?

One of the reasons that the snow leopard's status has improved (meaning that its numbers are declining less rapidly than previously thought) is due to greatly increased conservation efforts. These efforts must be continued and increased to slow or halt the decline in the snow leopard population and a potential worsening of its extinction risk (back to Endangered). [Learn about Panthera's Snow Leopard Conservation Program here.](#)

Why are some concerned about the change in classification?

Some believe that a change in status will be misinterpreted—that this change means that the snow leopard has been “saved” and efforts on its behalf could stop. That is why we must stress the risks the cat still faces and ensure conservation efforts continue unabated.

It has been suggested that a ‘downlist’ could lead to reduced funding for conservation. To some extent that is true. Some funding sources are restricted to Endangered or Critically Endangered species. But the potential impact to funding cannot be considered when conducting the assessment. Doing so would be unethical and would call the integrity of the Red List process itself into question.

Some people point out that we may not have adequate information to support a ‘downlisting’. However, a lack of information would not lead to maintaining the Endangered status. At the time of each assessment it must be proven that the species still meets the very strict IUCN criteria. Using the best available information, the assessment team concluded that the snow leopard only qualified for Vulnerable.

Others say that only 2% of snow leopard range has ever been adequately surveyed, so we don't have enough information on population size to make a judgement. As stated above, a lack of information would not lead to maintaining the Endangered status. And to reiterate, only the widely accepted lowest population estimate—4,000—was used in the assessment. We are striving to refine our estimates of population size and broad-scale surveys using scientifically appropriate methods being planned by the snow leopard community at large. But the fact that just 2% of snow leopard range has been adequately surveyed does not mean the change to Vulnerable is flawed due to insufficient data.

[Read the press release on this news to learn more.](#)