


15th September 2017
Independent — UK, Online

<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/snow-leopard-endangered-species-list-taken-off-no-longer-a7949181.html>

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Environment

Snow leopards no longer endangered for first time in 45 years

But scientists warn people should not be complacent about future of species

Caroline Mortimer | [@cjmortimer](#) | Friday 15 September 2017 16:07 BST | [0](#) comments



Scientists now estimate there are at least 4,000 mature adults in the wild *AFP/Getty Images*

Snow leopards are no longer considered an **endangered species**, according to an international body which has reclassified the animal for the first time in 45 years.

The International Union for the **Conservation** of Nature (IUCN) has moved the species into the less urgent “vulnerable” category – though it remains at risk from a reduction in numbers of its prey and poaching for its fur and bones.

The change follows a three-year assessment process by five international experts.

To be considered endangered there have to be fewer than 2,500 mature adult snow leopards in the wild, but experts now believe their true number may be around 4,000 with some saying it could be as high as 10,000.

Part of the reason for the miscalculation in the past has been the difficulty of tracking the big cats across their huge habitat in the Himalayas.

Scientists have managed to survey only a small fraction of the animal's high-mountain range, an area covering some 1.8 million square kilometres (695,000 square miles) crossing 12

countries in Asia.

Doing the research "is difficult," admitted Peter Zahler, coordinator of the snow leopard programme at the Wildlife Conservation Society, who was involved in the multi-agency team's assessment. "It involves an enormous amount of work in some of the most remote and inhospitable regions of the world."

New technologies, including camera traps and satellite collaring, are "giving us better information about where snow leopards are and how far they range," he said.

Some positive developments included an increase in the number of protected areas, as well as improved efforts by local communities to protect the animals from poachers.

Communities were also working to prevent cases of local herdsmen retaliating for lost livestock by building predator-proof livestock corrals, team member Rodney Jackson of the Snow Leopard Conservancy group said in a statement.

But although the reclassification is good news, Mr Zahler warns that we should not be complacent about the animal's future.

He said: "Saying snow leopards are now 'vulnerable' rather than 'endangered' doesn't mean they're safe.

"It doesn't take much to make large predators disappear from landscapes.

"We've seen it happen over and over again around the world." ●

