



Tigris Foundation

Amur leopard conservation update

by Michiel Hötte
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Introduction

Since the summer of 2002 I have been based in Vladivostok, working on the conservation of the Amur leopard and tiger. The year 2002 has been eventful for both Amur leopards and Amur leopard conservationists. As the year draws to an end I want provide you with a brief overview of the main developments and events of 2002.

The topics covered by this update are:

1. Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA)
2. Co-operation with WWF
3. International Amur Leopard Steering Group
4. Amur leopard media & communication campaign
5. Anti-poaching
6. Amur leopard monitoring
7. Amur leopard conservation in China

1. Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA)

In February 2002 a number of conservationists gathered in Moscow and established the Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA). ALTA partners already co-operate for many years but only recently formalised this co-operation. The implementing organisations of ALTA are Phoenix Fund from Vladivostok and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) from the USA. WCS has offices in Russia and China. ALTA members work towards a mutual conservation program. Members of our alliance are:

- *ALERTIS* (Holland)
www.alertis.nl
- *21st Century Tiger* (UK)
www.21stCenturyTiger.org
- *AMUR* (UK / Moscow)
www.amur.org.uk
- *Barbara Delano Foundation* (USA)
www.bdfoundation.org
- *David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation* (UK)
www.davidshepherd.org
- *IFAW* (Moscow - USA)
www.ifaw.org
- *Moscow Zoo*
www.zoo.ru/moscow
- *Phoenix Fund* (Vladivostok)
www.phoenix.vl.ru
- *Tigris Foundation* (Holland)
www.tigrisfoundation.nl
- *WildAid* (USA / Russia / Southeast Asia)
www.wildaid.org
- *Wildlife Conservation Society - WCS* (USA)
<http://wcs.org>
- *Zoological Society of London* (UK)
<http://wcs.org/home/wild/Asia/amurtiger>
www.zsl.org

I assist in the co-ordination of ALTA, and this work includes:

1. An analysis of long term threats to the survival of Amur tigers and leopards and opportunities for their conservation;
2. Assisting in the development of new projects;
3. Providing feed-back from the field to ALTA partners and sponsors;
4. Active participating in the International Amur Leopard Steering Committee.

2. Co-operation with WWF

Co-operation between ALTA members and WWF has improved considerably during 2002. We mainly thank this positive development to WWF's director, Yuri Darman, who is much more open and aware of the necessity of co-operation than previous local WWF directors. I hope that WWF Moscow and western WWF branches will continue to support our co-operation.

Together with WWF, Phoenix and WCS convinced the Wildlife Management Department to ban hunting of ungulates in Primorski Krai from May 1st to October 15th, 2002. This ban allowed the deer population to recover from the severe winter when many deer died as a result from exceptional snow fall. It also helped to decrease the pressure on Amur leopard and strengthen anti-poaching control in its range (with hunting closed, entering most forests with a gun became illegal, which made the anti-poaching more effective).

The following paragraphs contain more examples of fruitful joined activities by WWF and ALTA members.

3. International Amur Leopard Steering Group

The steering group was established at the end of the Amur leopard conference in May 2001. Unfortunately, the group functioned poorly for more than a year. At present, the group has become very productive, for a large part thanks to the input of the new secretary Olga Uphyrkina. The main sponsors of Amur leopard conservation (WWF, WCS, Phoenix and Tigris Foundation) have formed a core-group for leopard conservation. We meet frequently with the secretary of the steering committee. The work of the steering group and core-group had a number of concrete results, including:

1. A plan for a coalmine in the centre of the leopard range was stopped

We successfully protested against a plan to establish an open-pit coal mine in the centre of the leopard range. The local government performed a compulsory Environmental Impact assessment (EIA) to assess the damage of the mine to the environment. A team that included a frog specialist, but no leopard experts, performed the EIA. The assessment did not address the negative effects that the mine would have on the Amur leopard population. Members of the Amur Leopard Steering Group wrote a number of protest letters. We also involved the Ministry in Moscow that is responsible for conservation and EIAs. The ministry was not aware of the plans and took steps to examine and question the quality of the EIA performed by the local authorities. This pressure resulted in the decision by the local authorities to discontinue the coal mine plan. This was a major success. The coalmine could cause the extinction of the Amur leopard. However, we have to stay alert as a definite decision about the mine has not been made.

2. Co-operation between the prosecutor in the leopard range and local anti-poaching teams



The NGOs that form the Amur leopard core-group initiated intensive co-operation between the prosecutor in the district where most Amur leopards live and our local anti-poaching units. The prosecutor leads operations in which several dozen rangers search houses in small villages with a relatively large concentration of poachers. The first two operations resulted in the confiscation of 8 illegal rifles, several dozen kilograms of wild boar meat, ginseng roots, a large number of dried frogs and some narcotics. The first operation took place in a village where a leopard skin was confiscated in August. WWF and Tigris Foundation finance these activities.

Two rifles, cartridges and boar meat confiscated in December



Leopard skin confiscated in August 2002

3. Meeting planned with the local authorities and a press conference about leopard conservation in January 2003

In January leopard conservationists in Vladivostok will have an official meeting with the local committee of the ministry responsible for the conservation of the Amur leopard and other endangered species. The meeting will be followed by a press conference. We plan to discuss a number of concrete suggestions for improvements of the conservation of the Amur leopard.

3. 4. Design of an Amur leopard media campaign (see next paragraph)

4. Media and communication campaign

Local Russian authorities and citizens are unfamiliar with the Amur leopard and its conservation needs. Many residents of Vladivostok are not even aware of the fact that the last Amur leopards live only 20 kilometres away. The leopard range is in fact visible from the city when one looks out over the sea across the Bay of Vladivostok. The fact that Russians know little or nothing about the leopard, makes it difficult to arrange support for its conservation. Local authorities can take decisions that threaten the leopard's survival (such as the plan for a coalmine that was described before) without this affecting their popularity. We can only change this when we succeed to make the Amur leopard better known -and even loved- by Russians in general and most of all the citizens of Vladivostok. To achieve this, the core group of NGOs involved in leopard conservation is developing a communication and media campaign that will probably include:

1. Lobby activities focussed at the local authorities;
2. Coverage of leopard conservation issues in local journals and newspapers
3. Banners with a leopard conservation message across main roads in Vladivostok;
4. A leopard image and a conservation message on plastic bags that are used to pack the goods that customers buy in hunting shops;
5. A theatre play for school children and parents performed by a group of professional actors dressed up as leopards and other animals inhabit the local forests;
6. A television documentary about the Amur leopard.

5. Anti-poaching

ALTA members have diversified their anti-poaching activities in the leopard range in order not to have “all our eggs in one basket”. We now have several teams that are part of different government organisations. WWF and Phoenix recently agreed co-ordinate their funding of AP and to operate with identical funding conditions and mechanisms. WWF and Phoenix no longer provide fixed amounts of support for each team. From January 1st 2003 the support for teams will depend on their results. Teams will only be rewarded for results that are related to the conservation of leopards and tigers, including:

1. Fines and successful criminal persecutions related to hunting violations;
2. Confiscations of fire arms, skins and body parts of tigers and leopards;
3. Confiscation of illegally killed ungulates or ungulate meat.

6. Amur leopard monitoring

After a try-out period WCS and Russian scientists have recently started to monitor the Amur leopard population with the help of camera-traps. Tigris Foundation is the main sponsor of this



monitoring work. The first 3 weeks of the project were very successful and resulted in 9 sets of

leopard pictures (both sides of the animals are photographed). One of the leopards was still wearing a radio-collar that he received eight years ago. The scientists who put the radio-collar on this leopard estimated his age at that time at 3-5 years. This means that is leopard is at least 11 years old! That is as old as Methuselah for a leopard in the wild. It indicates that clever and experienced leopards are not killed easily by poachers and that the quality of the genetic material of the in-bred population may not be that bad after all.



Two camera-trap pictures made in December 2002 of the old male Amur leopard. Note the, even for an Amur leopard, exceptionally large spots.

Courtesy WCS, Dale Miquelle.

7. Conservation in China

Approximately 5,100 snares have been removed from the recently established Hunchun reserve in the Jilin Province of China.

The reserve is patrolled by 15 rangers who take their job very seriously. Dale Miquelle of WCS visited the reserve early December and found two tracks of different leopards and a single tiger track. One leopard track was approximately 10 kilometres from the border and the other leopard track was located even further away from Russia. This indicates that Amur leopards not only cross the border occasionally. Some leopards have probably settled down in China permanently!



Snares removed from Hunchun reserve (during the operation a leopard skin was found in a forest hut). Courtesy of WCS (Endi Zhang)