

Assessing Estimators of Snow Leopard Abundance

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ABSTRACT The secretive nature of snow leopards (*Uncia uncia*) makes them difficult to monitor, yet conservation efforts require accurate and precise methods to estimate abundance. We assessed accuracy of Snow Leopard Information Management System (SLIMS) sign surveys by comparing them with 4 methods for estimating snow leopard abundance: predator:prey biomass ratios, capture–recapture density estimation, photo–capture rate, and individual identification through genetic analysis. We recorded snow leopard sign during standardized surveys in the SaryChat Zapovednik, the Jangart hunting reserve, and the Tomur Strictly Protected Area, in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan and China. During June–December 2005, adjusted sign averaged 46.3 (SaryChat), 94.6 (Jangart), and 150.8 (Tomur) occurrences/km. We used counts of ibex (*Capra ibex*) and argali (*Ovis ammon*) to estimate available prey biomass and subsequent potential snow leopard densities of 8.7 (SaryChat), 1.0 (Jangart), and 1.1 (Tomur) snow leopards/100 km². Photo capture–recapture density estimates were 0.15 ($n = 1$ identified individual/1 photo), 0.87 ($n = 4/13$), and 0.74 ($n = 5/6$) individuals/100 km² in SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur, respectively. Photo–capture rates (photos/100 trap–nights) were 0.09 (SaryChat), 0.93 (Jangart), and 2.37 (Tomur). Genetic analysis of snow leopard fecal samples provided minimum population sizes of 3 (SaryChat), 5 (Jangart), and 9 (Tomur) snow leopards. These results suggest SLIMS sign surveys may be affected by observer bias and environmental variance. However, when such bias and variation are accounted for, sign surveys indicate relative abundances similar to photo rates and genetic individual identification results. Density or abundance estimates based on capture–recapture or ungulate biomass did not agree with other indices of abundance. Confidence in estimated densities, or even detection of significant changes in abundance of snow leopard, will require more effort and better documentation. (JOURNAL OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT 72(8):1826–1833; 2008)

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The snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) has been described as having an almost legendary secretiveness and camouflage, a characteristic that makes monitoring snow leopard populations difficult (Jackson and Hunter 1996). The first photograph of a wild snow leopard was not published until 1980 (Schaller 1980), and with live–capture rates as low as 3/1,000 trap–nights (McCarthy et al. 2005), conventional capture–recapture methods are logistically difficult. To monitor snow leopard populations efficiently, managers developed the Snow Leopard Information Management System (SLIMS; Jackson and Hunter 1996). For the last decade, SLIMS has been used range–wide to monitor status and distribution of snow leopards and their prey. The SLIMS assesses relative snow leopard abundance through repetitive standardized sign surveys (Jackson and Hunter 1996). As suggested by Anderson (2001), indices as a measure of abundance can be fraught with potential error and bias. The developers of SLIMS acknowledge this and suggest using a general procedure for estimating snow leopard numbers (Jackson and Hunter 1996). Unfortunately, due to lack of a more direct, affordable method, these and other potentially erroneous estimates are the basis for range–wide snow leopard population estimates (McCarthy and Chapron 2003).

In 2002, the Snow Leopard Survival Strategy was developed, which recommended that the use of sign transects to predict leopard abundance be tested (McCarthy and Chapron 2003). In short, to formulate and achieve conservation objectives, planners required tested methodologies for accurately estimating numbers and population trends. We assessed usefulness of sign surveys for estimating or predicting snow leopard population size or abundance by comparing them with 4 estimators of actual, potential, or relative snow leopard density: predator:prey biomass ratios, capture–recapture density estimation, photo–capture rate, and individual identification through genetic analysis.

STUDY AREA

Our research occurred from June to December 2005 and included 2 study areas in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan, the SaryChat Ertash Zapovednik and the Jangart Hunting Reserve, and a third study site in the adjacent Tomur Nature Reserve in the Tien Shan Mountains of China (Fig. 1). The 3 sites represent areas of varying prey density (Vereshagin et al. 2004; T. M. McCarthy, International Snow Leopard Trust, unpublished data) and, thus, we suspected variation in snow leopard density. We expected human–caused snow leopard mortality to be similar in each area, a necessary component of predator–prey modeling. Each area is characterized by

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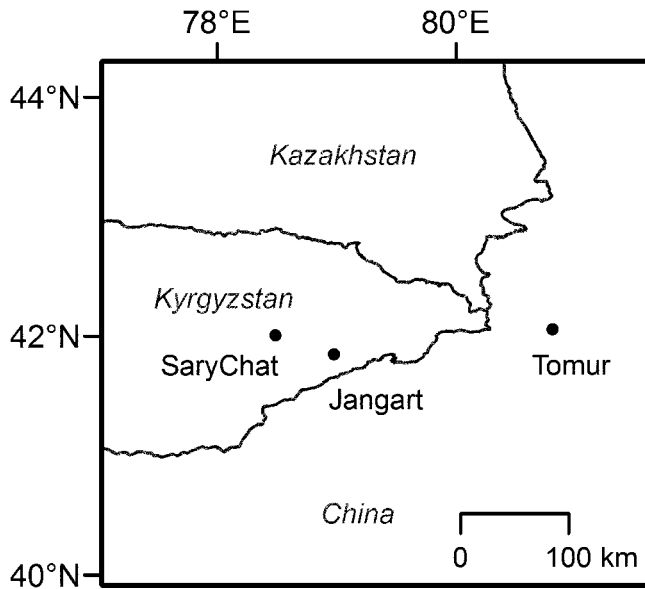


Figure 1. Study area diagram depicting 3 snow leopard camera capture–recapture study sites, SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur, in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan and China, 2005.

central river valleys with steep, rugged terrain rising to mountain peaks at $>4,000$ m. Vegetation was variable but similar in each area with predominant xerophytic grass species and barren rock. Based on geographical distance, average snow leopard home range, and separation by large rivers, we assumed each area to support independent snow leopard populations.

The SaryChat Ertash Zapovednik (SaryChat) was a 720-km^2 protected area in the Issyk Kul oblast of Kyrgyzstan and was a key component of the Issyk Kul Biosphere Reserve. The Jangart area was situated about 80 km southeast of SaryChat and was very near the Kyrgyz–China border. For decades Jangart served as a quasi-protected area owing to highly restricted access in the sensitive border zone. Jangart was recently designated as a hunting reserve. There was no permanent human habitation; however, hunting camps were used by local guides and their clients. The Chinese study site was within the Tomur, a protected area immediately across the China–Kyrgyz border and about 125 km east of Jangart. Hunting was forbidden and direct human impacts on snow leopard were minimal.

METHODS

The SLIMS sign surveys in all areas followed adaptations of Jackson and Hunter (1996) and focused on counting snow leopard feces, scrapes, claw rakes, scent marks, and pug marks. We selected survey sites throughout the study area based on topography and defined by watershed boundaries. Although it introduced bias into the sampling design, it was necessary to focus survey sites in areas likely to have snow leopard sign in terrain where even short transects can be exhaustive. Typically, search sites consisted of well-broken and rocky terrain, sharply defined ridgelines, cliff bases, river gorges, and entrances to well-defined valleys.

In each site we walked a survey line along the most likely

place to find snow leopard sign. In most cases, we placed survey lines along ridgelines (Jackson and Ahlborn 1989). Cliff bases, ridgelines, prominent features, and river confluences were also possible survey routes. As we walked transects we recorded length (based on paces) and number and type of sign. Numbers of scrapes and feces are correlated, as are total number of sign sites and total sign, suggesting that total average sign is valid as a comparative measure among study areas (McCarthy 2007).

We initially planned to conduct sign surveys in Kyrgyzstan and China consecutively within a 3-month time span to limit seasonal variation. Unfortunately, due to logistical constraints, we conducted the Tomur surveys in November and December, rather than August, and thus after snowfall, causing any accumulated sign to be snow-covered and unobservable. Therefore we partitioned the sign data to use the only 2 surveys completed there before snowfall, one ridgeline and one cliff-base survey. In addition, we conducted only ridgeline surveys in Jangart. Therefore we further partitioned the data to look only at ridgeline surveys in each study area. To preserve the only 2 presnow survey points in Tomur, we adjusted the cliff-base survey by the ratio of cliff-base sign to ridgeline sign found in SaryChat.

We adapted camera-trapping methods from Henschel and Ray (2003). Karanth et al. (2002) and Henschel and Ray (2003) provided detailed methods for using camera-traps in tiger and leopard (*Panthera pardus*) density estimation, respectively. Camera-trapping of snow leopards, although in its infancy, has had initial success as well. In Zaskar Valley, Ladakh India, Spearing (2002) captured 10 snow leopard images in just 64 camera-trap–nights, and in Hemis National Park, Ladakh, India, researchers captured 194 images, and 12 uniquely identifiable snow leopards, in 1,612 camera-trap–nights (Jackson et al. 2006).

We first identified suspected snow leopard trails and marking sites from past sign surveys or likely terrain features. Across each study area, in consecutive time periods, we set camera sites in these snow leopard trail or sign-site areas approximately 2 km apart in a roughly circular pattern. At each camera location we placed 2 CamTrakker™ Ranger cameras (CamTrakker, Watkinsville, GA), approximately 3 m apart across the trail or sign site. We placed cameras in rock piles or on metal stakes at approximately 45–50 cm from the ground and generally faced north or south. We programmed each camera with a 90-second delay between photographs, limiting images taken when ibex (*Capra ibex*) or argali (*Ovis ammon*) would pass by or stay in front of the camera. Trapping periods lasted 7–8 weeks.

Using spot pattern as a unique identifier, we created photo-capture histories based on the time of individual capture, with each day considered a unique trapping event. We excluded unidentifiable individuals from analyses. Where we captured >1 photo or animal, we used Program CAPTURE to compute N based on a jackknife model of heterogeneity ($M[h]$; Otis et al. 1978). Following Karanth and Nichols' (1998) discussion on capture–recapture models, we believe the $M(h)$ most accurately represents true snow

Table 1. Snow leopard home-range estimates (km²) and related ungulate density (no./km²) from published studies, India, 1990, Mongolia 1992, 2005, Nepal 1994, 1996, 1997.

Location	No. animals monitored	No. days monitored	Mean home-range size	Ungulate density	References
India	1	70	19	3–3.5	Chundawat 1990
Mongolia	1	41	12	1.7–2.3	Schaller et al. 1992
Nepal	3	Winter	19	6.6–10.2	Oli 1994, 1997
Nepal	5	120–450	19.4	4–8	Jackson et al. 1989
Mongolia	4	207	451	0.9	McCarthy et al. 2005

leopard behavior; that is, we expected each individual snow leopard to behave in a heterogeneous manner due to varying environmental factors and species interactions experienced by such a dispersed population.

Several different methods have been used in prior research on large felids to estimate the effective study area, or the sampling area to which the enumeration of individuals can be applied to estimate density (O'Brien et al. 2003, Wallace et al. 2003, Karanth et al. 2004). Each method is meant to spatially buffer potential capture locations to obtain a sampling area. The mean-maximum-distance-between-recaptures method is based on theoretical constructs for capture-recapture of small mammal populations, and some suggest it is less reliable as trap rate decreases and home range size increases (Wilson and Anderson 1985). A second method is maximum distance between recaptures (O'Brien et al. 2003), but it is not well-supported in the literature and is likely open to the same criticisms as the previous method. A third method is to use either the average minimum reported or average home-range size of the species of interest (Otis et al. 1978). For snow leopards, however, home range sizes vary greatly, likely in response to the available food biomass; also, there were no available snow leopard home-range data for the Tien Shan Mountains. To estimate home range size we first took an average of all available published snow leopard home-range data to create a buffer. Because home range size of carnivores is often inversely correlated with prey biomass (Fuller and Sievert 2001), we also took these snow leopard home-range data and associated ungulate densities (see below and Table 1), fit simple linear regression to them, and extracted expected snow leopard home-range size in each of our study areas. The regression analysis was limited by the paucity of data on snow leopard home range. However, extracted home-range estimates were similar to ranges estimated from one satellite and one Global Positioning System-collared cat from similar barren, low prey density areas in Mongolia and Pakistan (McCarthy et al. 2005; T. M. McCarthy, unpublished data).

To estimate snow leopard density, we calculated the effective study area size by each of the methods described above: greatest distance moved between recaptures, half the mean maximum distance moved in recaptured animals, radius of the average minimum home range or average home range, and radius of the estimated home range from ungulate densities (McCarthy 2007). We then used the resultant total coverage of the camera sites and buffer circles as the effective study area for density calculations.

We used photo rates (e.g., photos/100 trap-nights) as an index of abundance (Carbone et al. 2001). We calculated photo rates for each of our sites as number of individual photo events divided by total number of trap-nights. We defined a photo event as any photo (or set of photos at a given photo-trap site) of a snow leopard, even if it was unidentifiable as an individual, taken on a given day (we considered days independent). One photo showed 2 snow leopards walking together; however, in general, unless a mother is with cubs, the snow leopard is a solitary animal. Photo rate as an index of abundance is simple, and, although it does not provide specific numbers, it may be more reliable for rare species and small sample sizes where traditional capture-recapture methods have less power (Wilson and Anderson 1985, Carbone et al. 2001).

We used ungulate surveys to estimate ungulate biomass and the potential density of snow leopards supportable by that biomass (Fuller and Sievert 2001, Carbone and Gittleman 2002). Here, ibex and argali surveys followed SLIMS methodology in Jackson and Hunter (1996). We identified search sites to provide coverage throughout each study area using 1:100,000 topographical maps. We then traveled to each site and located a vantage point where a high proportion of the survey block was visible, while maintaining enough distance so as not to disturb any ungulates present. We recorded on the topographic map the boundaries of the visible area and subsequently calculated its area. We used binoculars (10×) and spotting scopes (15–45×) to locate and determine group size, sex and age of individual ibex, and number of argali. We conducted surveys in the early morning and late afternoon when animals are likely feeding and sun position makes them most visible. We surveyed no blocks more than once. We calculated size of the effective area for these data as the total area surveyed, as defined on the topographical map. We did not calculate detection probabilities due to the difficulty of accurately measuring distances to sighted animals. However, similar terrain in each study site likely leads to equivalent detection probabilities and total ungulate counts can be used as a relative index between sites.

To calculate ungulate biomass we first applied proportions of identified age and sex classes of ibex to unidentified animals, assuming that age and sex class proportions of identified animals and unidentified animals were similar (McCarthy 2007). In this manner, we could include all individuals in biomass calculations. We then calculated total biomass for each study area based on average Siberian ibex weights and average argali weights as reported by Fedosenko

Table 2. Capture–recapture results of snow leopards photographed in Kyrgyzstan and China, 2005.

Area	No. of capture events ^a	Trap rate ^b	No. of individuals identified	No. of individuals recaptured	Method	Estimated <i>N</i>	SE	95% CI
SaryChat	1	0.085	1	0	Min ^c	1	0.47	1–1
Jangart	6	0.557	5	1	M(h) ^d	7	3.62	6–25
Tomu	13	1.102	4	3	M(h)	6	5.35	5–38

^a Capture events where we captured an individually identifiable snow leopard in a given day; we counted multiple captures in the same day of one individual as one capture event.

^b Captures/100 trap-nights.

^c With only one capture event, mark–recapture modeling is not possible. We substituted $N \geq 1$ for an estimated *N*.

^d M(h) represents the use of the model for heterogeneity in Program CAPTURE.

and Blank (2001). We next computed ungulate biomass/100 km² using Carbone and Gittleman’s (2002) conversion factor of 10,000 kg prey for 90 kg of predator and extrapolated to potential snow leopard numbers using the average snow leopard weight of approximately 50 kg.

These calculations assumed that the survey sites as a whole encompass the total of each respective study area and that capture probabilities were similar in each area. We recognized that snow leopard density estimates might be high or low, however, because these calculations also assume that snow leopards are the only carnivore reliant on the ungulate biomass present, even though other predators such as brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and wolf (*Canis lupus*) are also present in unknown numbers, and that these snow leopard density calculations do not account for small animals consumed by snow leopards such as marmots (*Marmota baibacina*) and hares (*Lepus tolai*). For further analyses we assumed that variation caused by other predators or food resources was similar across sites and that our rough estimates are at least comparable in a relative, if not absolute, sense.

We collected samples of suspected snow leopard feces along SLIMS transect lines throughout each study area. To minimize collection of erroneous samples, we preferentially selected based on their size, shape, location, and surrounding sign. For example, we collected feces found along a ridgeline, near or in a suspected snow leopard scrape, but we did not collect feces found alone on a survey with no corroborative sign or in an unlikely position. This sampling method does not lend itself to unbiased population estimates; however, with a limited budget it was necessary to maximize likelihood of collecting true snow leopard feces. To avoid contamination, we collected fecal samples of approximately 1 mL using latex gloves and plastic spoons. We then stored samples in individual 5-mL transport tubes containing 4 mL of 90% ethanol. We performed DNA extraction and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) set up in a facility dedicated to low-quantity DNA samples. We conducted DNA extraction with the Qiagen stool kit (Qiagen Inc., Valencia, CA) using standard manufacturer protocols and including negative controls to monitor for contamination. We identified the species depositing each fecal sample by PCR and sequencing of an approximately 160–base-pair section of the cytochrome B gene of the mitochondrial DNA control region using established primers and previously published methods (Farrell et al.

2000, Onorato et al. 2006). We attempted individual identification for all snow leopards using 10 polymorphic microsatellite loci as outlined in Waits et al. (2007). Probability of observing matching genotypes for unrelated individuals (2.1×10^{-11}) and siblings (7.5×10^{-5}) is extremely low using these loci (Waits et al. 2007), so we could easily discriminate individuals. We replicated genotypes 2–8 times/locus/sample and accepted them for use only after they met 95% reliability criteria using Reliotype (Miller et al. 2002).

RESULTS

We conducted surveys and trapping for 49 days in SaryChat (28 May–15 Jul 2005), 49 days in Jangart (3 Aug–20 Sep 2005), and 59 days in Tomur (23 Oct–20 Dec 2005). We completed SLIMS sign surveys in SaryChat ($N = 16$ surveys; total transect length = 8.2 km), Jangart ($N = 13$; 8.6 km), and the Tomur ($N = 20$; 15.0 km) study sites.

Overall, without any corrections, average sign/km was 16.4 (SE = 7.4), 40.7 (SE = 11.0), and 94.6 (SE = 16.9) in SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur, respectively, with between-group variation ($F_{2,46} = 11.85$, $P \leq 0.001$). Data partitions and proportional adjustments provided us with revised average sign numbers for presnow, ridgeline-only surveys. For these adjusted counts, sign density was 46.3/km (SE = 13.0, SaryChat), 94.6/km (SE = 16.9, Jangart), and 150.9/km (SE = 18.1, Tomur), with between-group variation ($F_{2,24} = 4.28$, $P = 0.026$). By using snow-free counts we limited bias associated with sign visibility and other weather-related variations, and were able to make clearer comparisons among sites. However, this left us with only 2 survey points in Tomur, one of them adjusted, limiting our overall confidence in inferences from these results.

We deployed cameras over a period of 7 months in the 3 study areas at 20–24 stations (Table 2). Intervals between study periods were required for transferring equipment between sites. Number of trap-nights in each area ranged between 1,078 and 1,180 and was a function of the number of camera stations and number of days they remained operable.

Capture rates (no. of different, identifiable individuals captured/100 trap-nights) were lower than expected, ranging from <0.1 to 1.1 (Table 2). At SaryChat, our first study site, we captured only one snow leopard image, which limited our results to a minimum population of one. For the Jangart and Tomur sites, we obtained 10 and 28 snow

leopard photos (i.e., photo events), but due to several individuals being unidentifiable, or having multiple pictures of the same animal in the same capture period, we were only able to record 6 and 13 capture events, respectively. We photographically recaptured 1 of 5 individuals at Jangart and 3 of 4 individuals at Tomur. Estimated population sizes in these 2 areas were 7 (SE = 3.62) and 6 (SE = 5.35), with large confidence limits of 6–25 and 5–38 animals, respectively.

We placed buffers of 7.67 km, 11.78 km, and 11.47 km, equal to the estimated radius of a snow leopard home range based on available ungulate biomass (our best estimate of an appropriate, area-specific buffer; McCarthy 2007), around the SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur camera-trapping sites, respectively. We used the area within buffered camera sites, measured at 655 km², 808 km², and 813 km², as our effective study area for SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur, respectively. Given these effective areas, estimated snow leopard density from capture–recapture calculations was 0.15 individuals/100 km² in SaryChat, 0.87/100km² in Jangart, and 0.74/100km² in Tomur. We obtained photo rates (no. snow leopard photos/100 trap-nights) of 0.09 in SaryChat, 0.93 in Jangart, and 2.37 in Tomur from camera capture data.

Ungulate surveys covered 141 km² in SaryChat, 86 km² in Jangart, and 250 km² in Tomur, with 228, 11, and 264 ibex counted, and 397, 0, and 29 argali counted, respectively. Total estimated ibex biomass ranged from 659 kg to 13,191 kg, and ranged from 767 kg ibex/100 km² to 9,197 kg ibex/100 km² (Table 3). Total estimated argali biomass ranged from 3,552 kg to 48,632 kg and ranged from 4,130 kg argali/100 km² to 34,491 kg argali/100 km². Overall, total ungulate biomass ranged from 4,897 kg/100 km² to 43,688 kg/100 km². Potential snow leopard densities, based on Carbone and Gittleman's (2002) formula, were 8.7, 1.0, and 1.1 individuals/100 km² in SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur, respectively.

Genotyping of feces generated a higher number of known individuals than visual discrimination of photographs and provided minimum population estimates for SaryChat, Jangart, and Tomur of 3, 5, and 9 individuals, respectively, based on 9, 9, and 17 successful genotypes, respectively. However, we also found that in our fecal collection we collected several other species than snow leopard, and, in fact, our collection error (non–snow leopard species) averaged 41%. The most commonly collected feces other than snow leopard were red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*; 27%). Other erroneous collections include stone marten (*Martes foina*; 6%), wolf (4%), Chinese desert cat (*Felis bieti*; 3%), and wild boar (*Sus scrofa*; 1%). To assess how this may have affected SLIMS surveys we looked at the average number of sites in each survey where there was both a feces and a scrape present, increasing our confidence that it was true snow leopard sign. These data showed a strong correlation with average total sign/km, ($r_{47} = 0.89$, $P \leq 0.001$), suggesting that error in sign collection is likely consistent across sites

Table 3. Total ibex biomass (kg), categorized by age class, and total argali biomass (age class data unavailable) in 3 study sites of Kyrgyzstan and China, 2005.

	Study area		
	SaryChat	Jangart	Tomur
Total Ibex	228	11	264
Kids	502	32	1,124
Yearlings	264	0	619
Subad M	903	0	847
Ad M	7,473	450	7,128
Subad F	652	0	118
Ad F	3,173	177	3,355
Total ibex biomass	12,967	659	13,191
Total argali biomass	48,632	3,552	0

and that relative amount of snow leopard sign is not influenced by species identification error.

DISCUSSION

We identified several key issues in efficacy of SLIMS sign surveys. First, sign surveys are subject to observer bias. Members of our field crew with similar training and experience often disagreed over what constituted a snow leopard scrape when conducting transects together; though we attempted to come to an agreement on what constituted a snow leopard scrape, we likely continued to make some different identifications. Perhaps more importantly, 2 different field crews, both SLIMS-trained, erroneously collected non–snow leopard fecal samples for DNA analysis and, thus, likely misidentified such sign in the field while conducting SLIMS surveys. Our limited dataset suggests that erroneous fecal collection rates may be equal across sites and that the overall magnitude may be unaffected. However, this equality may not be true across snow leopard range where sign identifiers differ and where there are differing species in different abundances whose sign could be confused with that of snow leopards. This bias could artificially inflate sign numbers unequally, making its value as a relative index questionable.

Second, environmental conditions such as snowfall and site differences likely also affect amount of snow leopard sign detected. Limiting our sign survey results to account for environmental variability (snow cover) and site selection bias (ridgeline) may have provided more comparable relative indices of snow leopard abundance between sites. Although sign transects are valuable for presence–absence surveys, standard SLIMS sign surveys that do not account for variation in sampling design may be unreliable.

The camera capture–recapture method has been identified as a viable way to estimate densities of individually recognizable animals with large home ranges and low densities (e.g., Silver et al. 2004). For snow leopard, however, extremely low capture rates and associated high standard errors suggest that under some circumstances this method may be vulnerable to logistical constraints. Recent camera capture–recapture surveys in the Hemis National Park of India have proven successful in providing snow

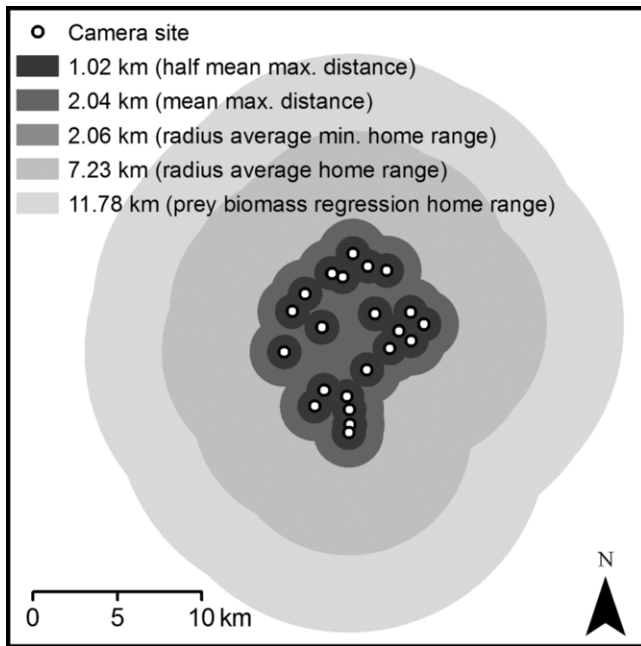


Figure 2. Effective snow leopard study-area buffers around camera-trap sites in the Jangart hunting reserve, Kyrgyzstan, 2005, based on differing methods from the literature.

leopard density estimates with lower standard errors, but that study was in an established long-term research area with high snow leopard densities (4–8/100 km²) where capture rates were high (5.6–8.9 vs. <0.1–1.1/100 trap-nights in our areas; Jackson et al. 2006).

Snow leopard densities and home range areas likely vary greatly over their range as a function of varying environmental and resource conditions. In areas with low snow leopard densities and little prior knowledge of snow leopard behavior, it may prove impossible to attain an adequate capture rate for viable capture–recapture modeling within the 7-week suggested time frame to maintain population closure (Karanth et al. 2002). This is consistent with the suggestions of Jackson et al. (2006) that camera capture–recapture may only work when snow leopard densities are high enough to provide ample capture–recapture data.

Another constraint of density estimation using capture–recapture models is the method for determining the effective area surveyed. It is important to buffer the study area to account for animals that traverse outside the range of camera sites. Several methods have been used in prior research on large felids including buffers equal to the radius of the average minimum home range, half the mean maximum distance moved in recaptured animals, and the greatest distance moved between recaptures (O’Brien et al. 2003, Wallace et al. 2003, Karanth et al. 2004). Each of these methods seemed suspect for our data and, hence, we chose to use a buffer width equal to the radius of the average snow leopard home range as estimated from local ungulate abundance. However, due to variation between estimated ungulate densities and snow leopard densities, this method is also suspect. By selecting a different method, density

estimates can be altered dramatically (see Fig. 2), which suggests that with low capture rates and variable home-range sizes, camera capture–recapture density estimates (as opposed to simple photo rates) of snow leopards may be unreliable. However, photo-rates do appear to be a legitimate index of leopard abundance in our study areas based on similarity with genetic individual identification. Photo-rate as a relative index may be suitable when true densities are not needed but where an accurate index to population size is sufficient.

We expect that with an increase in prey biomass there should be an increase in predator biomass (Fuller and Sievert 2001, Carbone and Gittleman 2002). However, given our small sample sizes overall it is understandable that ungulate biomass did not provide snow leopard population estimates similar to other methods. It is possible that the lack of correlation is driven by previous loss of snow leopards from the area due to poaching or disease, though we have no evidence for this. This previous loss of snow leopards could allow ungulate populations in SaryChat to expand while snow leopard populations were low, a likely scenario for SaryChat (A. Vereshagin, Bashat Community Business Forum [Bashat CBF], personal communication). Another factor affecting the predator:prey ratio could be competition with wolves. Varying environmental conditions could increase niche overlap and create higher competition for food resources. Finally, and perhaps most likely, ungulate surveys are suspect due to methodology. Although ungulate surveys covered each of our study areas, survey areas were only a small proportion of the total area used by our photo-captured snow leopards. Also we did not repeat surveys, and in retrospect, they seem fairly cursory; thus, estimates from our surveys may be far from representative of true ungulate densities in an area, especially given the lack of known detection probabilities. So, regardless of whether ungulate counts are accurate, or whether snow leopard populations are affected by unknown factors such as poaching, disease, or competition, the use of prey biomass:snow leopard ratios may be unsupported.

Genetic analysis of fecal DNA showed promising potential as an index of snow leopard abundance. A more structured format for scat collection, such as repetitive transects distributed over several months, would allow for insight into marking behavior and territoriality and even provide a framework for density estimation (Gese 2001). Scent pads to collect hair samples from cheek rubbing (Weaver et al. 2005) could also be used to create a more rigorous sampling design. In addition to the advantage of reliable identification not subject to observer bias, genetic data can provide valuable and unique information about genetic relationships (including source of dispersers) that is not obtainable with the other methods. However, the biggest limitation in either case is cost (currently approx. US\$50–225/sample) and logistics of transporting fecal matter between countries. By using in-country labs to obtain genetic data, costs could be minimized and trans-

portation issues eliminated. However, specialized equipment and training would be needed.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Previous SLIMS sign surveys are important as an index to abundance, and all surveys should be subjected to similar correction factors to account for differences in weather and transect location. Future SLIMS surveys can be improved by implementing more rigorous training of observers and designing sampling schemes range-wide to limit the effect of random placement of survey transects and environmental variation. However, further research into accuracy of sign discrimination is warranted before any value is placed on sign survey data. Ungulate surveys as conducted currently by SLIMS researchers range-wide may be best used as presence-absence indicators. Photo capture-recapture density estimation may be of little value when population numbers are extremely low and individuals are elusive and highly dispersed; elsewhere, this technique may provide useful insights (Jackson et al. 2006). In many circumstances, however, photo capture rates may provide more reliable results than capture-recapture density estimation as an index to relative abundance. The most promising method for future monitoring of snow leopard populations may be fecal DNA analysis especially given lower costs and a more rigorous standardized study design.

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