

Amur Leopard Project Update Autumn 2009 season

Captive leopard health screen update

Health screening is good reintroduction practice, and is especially important for this project. The introduction of any feline disease into the region could jeopardize the future of the existing wild Amur tiger and leopard populations. To date, 36 cats within the European Captive Breeding Programme (EEP) have been comprehensively or partially screened. A screening protocol has been drafted by Dr Lewis, who is also the veterinary advisor to the EEP. No candidate leopard should be transferred to the Russian Far East until all tests within the protocol have been applied with a satisfactory result. The North American Amur Leopard breeding program (SSP) is in an earlier stage of development, but a uniform approach has been agreed from both sides of the Atlantic. Health screening data from wild and captive Amur leopards will be held in the Amur leopard Veterinary Database, funded by WVI supporters.



Dr John Lewis and Dr Mikhail Goncharuk

Capacity building

As local wildlife veterinary support is considered necessary for the long term future of wild Amur leopard populations, the bad weather gave Dr. Lewis the opportunity to work with young Russian field vet Dr. Mr Mikhail Gonchuruk. It was possible

to start exploring the Russian literature (not available outside Russia) for references on infectious disease in the area, detail all the Russian vet schools with their specialities, and provide practical training in the field anaesthesia of bear and deer. In addition, time was available to analyse the two post mortem examinations reports of wild Amur leopards which had been submitted to the local vet school in Ussurisk. Critical appraisal of such information is essential if value is to be derived from the limited investigations currently possible.

Towards the end of the field season Dr Lewis was able to participate in a workshop at the Primorskaya State Academy of Agriculture (PSAA) in Ussurisk teaching vets and vet students about wildlife medicine. These workshops are very popular with the younger generation of vets in the RFE – which augers well for the future!



A wild male Amur leopard recovering from the anaesthetic after trapping

The Amur leopard is the world's most endangered cat, with as few as 25 individuals now surviving in the Russian Far East. This population is in grave danger of extinction due to numerous factors including ongoing development in the region, logging activity, hunting and poaching, forest fires, inbreeding depression due to low genetic diversity within the remaining leopard population, and the potential for disease transmission from domestic animals.

A large coalition of foreign non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and regional agencies of the Russian Federation are, however, working together to secure a future for the leopard through vigorous conservation activities to protect the existing population and to start an imaginative reintroduction scheme for a second population in former leopard habitat.

Wildlife Vets International (WVI) is the British charity which provides the specialist veterinary services of Dr. John Lewis for this project. WVI is committed to supporting this project long-term, and further funding is urgently required. Your support is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

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Trapping

This year's field season in the Russian Far East was full of frustrations. No wild leopards were caught despite several being close to the camp. One Asiatic Black bear was trapped and serological investigation suggested that Lyme Disease is present in the area. (Although this evidence has not arisen directly from leopards, it helps alert us to diseases in the area to which leopards MAY be susceptible). One tiger and a large deer were also caught. The snares are designed to avoid deer capture, however larger species are sometimes caught. Towards the end of the season there were very bad snow storms and temperatures dropped to minus 24°C. To avoid injuring the leopards, trapping is not advisable under these conditions and a couple of weeks catching time was lost as a result.



Dr J. Lewis checking snares



Dr Lewis' accommodation.

Temperatures of minus 24°C meant it was dangerous to trap

Heart murmurs in captive leopards

Heart murmurs have been detected in both wild and captive Amur leopards (some in different subspecies) examined by Dr Lewis. Detailed electrocardiographic and echocardiographic investigations have been conducted in 10 affected captive leopards in the UK by Professor Malcolm Cobb of Nottingham University and Dr Sarah Smith. Murmurs in these animals were found to be a direct consequence of an anaesthetized animal's position. No suggestion of significant cardiac pathology resulting from congenital or genetic defects is currently made. Similar findings have now been reported from Copenhagen, Omaha and Minnesota zoos. This research demonstrates the information from studying the captive population is directly relevant to findings from wild counterparts.

WVI objectives re Amur Leopards

1. To evaluate the health status of the existing Amur leopard population and identify any disease issues that may threaten their survival.
2. To identify any significant diseases in wildlife, agricultural or domestic species in the proposed release zone that may pose a threat to reintroduced leopards.
3. To avoid the introduction of any novel disease into wildlife, agricultural or domestic species of Primorsky Krai during attempts to

reintroduce leopards into the area from captive stock..

4. To provide ongoing monitoring of the health of the existing leopard population in Southwest Primorsky Krai and that of any reintroduced leopards in the Southern Sikhote-Alin Mountains throughout the life of the project.
5. To develop and maintain a flexible disease risk management strategy for wild Amur leopards



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