

Notes from the Field

WINTER 2018

**CLOUDED LEOPARD—GONE,
BUT NOT FORGOTTEN**

**GATEKEEPERS TO
THE BEARS**

**KEEPING HAMMERHEADS
OUT OF NETS**



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Wildlife Conservation Network

CLOUDED LEOPARD

Gone, but Not Forgotten

It's been over 70 years since clouded leopards prowled the forests of Taiwan. Now, conservationists have found important reasons to bring them back.

In the late 1960s Jack relocated to Sumatra, a tropical island nestled between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. His home there also felt like an island, a house surrounded by a sea of spectacular wildlife—tigers, elephants, orangutans. Rhinoceroses would wallow in the cool mud beneath Jack's house. And inside, curled up at the foot of his bed, docile as a tabby cat, was a clouded leopard. It had been orphaned as a kitten and with no rescue centers in Sumatra at the time, would have surely died if Jack hadn't taken it in. Jack would one day tell his nephew, conservationist Dr. Jim Sanderson, that the years spent with this clouded leopard were his most cherished. Fortuitously, Jim has dedicated his life to protecting small wild cats and is working on a project to benefit the clouded leopards his uncle so adored.

Bigger than a small cat, yet smaller than a big cat, the clouded leopard is striking; its brownish-grey coat a potpourri of marbled blotches, black streaks, and spots. Although found in many parts of Asia, Jim and his colleague, Po-Jen Chiang from Formosan Wild Sound, are focused on Taiwan, where clouded leopards have been effectively eradicated since the 1940s. Though no longer in Taiwan's forests, clouded leopards remain very much alive in its culture. Statues of this long-absent cat are peppered throughout Taiwanese communities, reminders of the significance they hold. This cultural prominence is prompting indigenous people to drive efforts to bring them back.

Reintroduction is not a new idea, it had been considered in the 1980s, but never

gained traction. However, there is now renewed interest from three indigenous tribal groups inspired by Po-Jen's years of research on the subject. **Along with cultural value, Po-Jen's research shows a solid ecological reason for reintroducing the clouded leopard.** Decades without them has allowed certain prey species to rebound a little too well, local farmers are losing crops to a growing onslaught of sambar and macaques. This is good news for clouded leopards, as there is plenty of prey and habitat waiting for them in Taiwan and people there are eager for this predator to return.

Fourteen hundred miles away, in a breeding center in Thailand, there are five active and four potential clouded leopard breeding pairs that could be the key to Taiwan's reintroduction. It's remarkable that so few individuals could propagate an entire population, but **these cats breed quickly and if their offspring can be released into Taiwan's forests, conservationists have a real shot at bringing this species back.** If they can pull it off, the benefits would be numerous; increasing the habitat range of this vulnerable species, controlling an overpopulation of prey, protecting local farmers' crops, and returning a cultural symbol to the people who have revered it for centuries. ●



SPECTACLED BEAR

Gatekeepers to the Bears

The truck bounces and shakes almost the entire way to Gramalote, the path is often more rocks and craters than actual road. It takes conservationists from Spectacled Bear Conservation (SBC) nine hours to reach the village, sluggishly winding their way up the steep curves of the mountain. SBC has spent 10 years protecting spectacled bears in the low elevation dry forest, but Gramalote offers an entryway into high elevation terrain. **It is here in the high alpine cloud forest and páramo where SBC has discovered a whole new population of bears.** The people of Gramalote are the gatekeepers to these bears.

In northern Peru, land is typically owned by the local people who decide how it can be used. Many of these people live in remote mountain villages, like Gramalote, in traditional lifestyles they've sustained for generations.

A year ago, conservationists at SBC suspected there were bears on the 50,000 acres of pristine forest owned by the Gramalote community; to find out, they needed permission to access the land.

In exchange for helping install pipes in the village's school, which lacked running water, the community allowed SBC to set up a few camera traps on their land. SBC's hunch was right, **in just the first month their camera traps photographed ten bears in the area.** This may sound small, but previously, in a different location, SBC found only eight bears using 200 camera traps over a four-year span. Ten bears in one month was a windfall. SBC is now eager to install additional camera traps with the hopes of identifying more bears and to better understand what bears need to maintain a viable, healthy population. This requires them to have continuous access to this area, which means building a lasting, trusting relationship with the villagers in Gramalote.

Based on the great success they've had working with local communities via their women's handicraft program—SBC recently brought the program to Gramalote. The “felti” program teaches women how to create decorative woolen animals that SBC sells globally, investing the money back into the program. Women are able to generate an ongoing stream of vital income for their families and gain a sense of empowerment as they become more financially independent. This provides an excellent incentive for the community to work with conservationists. In fact, the people of Gramalote have recently agreed to help SBC turn their part of the cloud forest into a protected area; protecting not only bears, but an entire rich ecosystem of diverse plants and animals.

SBC's work in Gramalote has been an effective step towards creating a contiguous protected area across all of northern Peru's bear habitat. This is their long-term goal; they aim to do it one village at a time. ●



A young woman now makes an income creating woolen “felti” bears.

HAMMERHEAD SHARK

Keeping Hammerheads out of Nets

The rumbling of the motorboat was gone. Rachel could no longer hear the whistle of the wind or the squawking sea birds, the only sound left was her own breath as she dove deeper into the warm Caribbean water. The Belize Barrier Reef spread out before her in a kaleidoscope of color; the visibility was incredible, clear as glass for 100 feet in all directions. The tranquility



A hammerhead found on a fishing boat.

was quickly interrupted by an enormous hammerhead shark barreling towards her. Her breathing pounded in her ears as 15 feet of pure muscle shot through the water, powerful as a rocket and graceful

as a dancer, close enough to touch. Rachel was in awe.

This happened 20 years ago, but marine conservationist Dr. Rachel Graham conjures the memory as if no time has passed. It continues to motivate her efforts to keep sharks in the oceans and out of fishing nets. Right now, off the coast of Belize where several members of Rachel's team

at MarAlliance are based, **endangered hammerhead sharks are caught in nets at an alarming rate. Sadly, their hallmark hammer-shaped head makes them especially susceptible.** When caught, their fins are bound for Asian markets, where shark fin soup is a status symbol. Their meat is typically sold locally, but fishers have started salting the meat, enabling transportation across international boundaries. Hammerheads now have the unfortunate distinction of being an illegally trafficked species.

Hammerheads are also one of dozens of marine species unintentionally caught as bycatch, essentially the fishing industry's collateral damage; an occurrence that is worsening as fishers become less discriminating about what and how much

they are able to procure from the ocean. MarAlliance wants to halt the killing of hammerheads; one of their effective methods is to encourage local fishers to adopt alternatives to nets, such as hook and line fishing. MarAlliance then hires these fishers as monitors, to help collect data on sharks, which offsets any income lost from not using nets.

Successful conservation is informed by an understanding of a species' behavior, breeding patterns, and population health. MarAlliance obtains these assessments by catching hammerheads, quickly gathering data on size and sex, satellite tagging (for monitoring), and then releasing them. There are many challenges to this work—including the difficulty of catching a hammerhead, ironic for an animal so easily entangled in fishing nets—conservationists need all the help they can get. **Turning fishers into shark monitors increases MarAlliance's ability to learn about a species that scientists know precious little about;** the more they know about hammerheads, the better equipped they are to protect them. Additionally, because their income is supplemented and they are connected with conservation, fishers have become enthusiastic advocates for sharks, encouraging others in their communities to protect them. This means fewer nets and more sharks in the water, and that means more opportunities to inspire awe in all of us. ●

"I love catching sharks knowing that I will release them and they get to live; participating in the shark research and monitoring represents between 15-20% of my yearly earnings. I fish less and leave more fish in the sea!"

*— Evaristo Muschamp
Fisher, Belize*

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