

Notes from the Field

WINTER 2019

**ENVIRONMENTAL
DISASTER BRINGS
HOPE TO SAIGAS**

**REVIVING SPIRITUAL
TIES TO SNOW
LEOPARDS**

**NEW OPPORTUNITY
FOR PATAGONIA'S
PENGUINS**



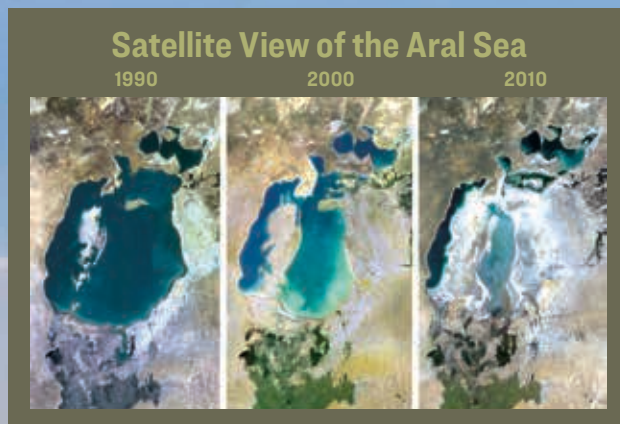
WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Environmental Disaster Brings Hope to Saigas

EJ was thousands of miles from the nearest ocean in one of the most landlocked countries on Earth. Yet scattered around her were the rusted out skeletons of ships, relics from a defunct fishing industry. Before it was a ship graveyard, this vast area of sand and shrubs in northwestern Uzbekistan was the Aral Sea, once the world's fourth largest body of freshwater. But from the 1980s through the aughts, its water was over-extracted to support unsustainable cotton production until nearly the entire sea and its bordering fishing towns dried up. The beached ships that remain represent what EJ calls "the greatest environmental disaster you've never heard of." The loss of the Aral Sea is a tragedy, but for the highly endangered saiga antelope this story of destruction is becoming a story of hope.

In the 1990s, as human recklessness was eradicating the Aral Sea, poachers nearly eradicated one of the largest herds of saiga antelope. Poachers target male saiga for their horns, which are coveted for an illegal market of Asian medicines, devastating populations and leaving females unable to reproduce. However, for decades there was one place poachers could not access. This place now holds promise for reviving the saiga population in Uzbekistan.



When the Aral Sea was still a sea, it sheltered an island where the Soviet government conducted covert laboratory testing of biological weapons. Called Resurrection Island, this place was top secret during the Cold War, civilians were kept out. With no people to cause disruption, the area became a wildlife haven. It remained safe for wildlife even after both the Soviet Union and the Aral Sea dissolved.

In 2012, the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) conducted an ecological survey of Resurrection Island (now an island only in name) that showed isolation had given the area a unique, undisturbed ecology. SCA believes this untouched area will be key in recovering Uzbekistan's saiga populations.

There are already signs that saigas are in the area; SCA has been finding saiga hoofprints in Resurrection Island's muddy soil. Fortunately, because that soil remains too soft for vehicles to drive across, the area remains largely inaccessible to poachers. This is significant because it gives saiga populations a real chance to rebound safely. SCA is confident there is a future here for saigas, they have started working on protected area management to help restore nature and encourage saigas to return in large numbers.



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The Aral Sea is gone, but in its place is a new ecosystem that could benefit wildlife and local people. Communities that lost everything when the fishing industry crumbled can start to explore new livelihoods. SCA is in the beginning phases of developing a five-year plan to invest in schools, income-generating craft production, and tourism opportunities to transform the lives of people in this area. With continued investment from SCA, Resurrection Island may get a chance to live up to its name, restoring hope for communities and for saigas. ●

Background: This ship graveyard was once part of the Aral Sea. Above: SCA is confident that a strong saiga population can return to Resurrection Island.



Reviving Spiritual Ties to Snow Leopards



Sarkori Davlatmammadov

Firuz was caught somewhere between surprise and horror. It was early, he had just begun his morning routine, starting with checking on his cattle. When he opened the door to his livestock enclosure Firuz was stunned. More than half of his animals, six rams and one goat, were dead—torn apart by a husky snow leopard still lurking inside. He shut the door and scrambled to the roof to close the upper window too. He then considered his options: kill the snow leopard or set it free?

He set it free.

For years, stories like this ended with a dead snow leopard. Many herders in the mountains stretching through the snow leopard's Central Asian range have lost livestock to a hungry cat. Livestock are an enticing meal for snow leopards crafty enough to infiltrate a corral. For herders like Firuz, losing

livestock is like going bankrupt. One snow leopard could demolish a herder's entire livelihood, and that herder might retaliate.

The Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) has been at the forefront of reducing retaliatory killings, a major threat to snow leopards, by helping communities address their needs without harming snow leopards—like constructing predator-proof corrals. Recognition that communities are the key to snow leopards' survival is also at the heart of a network, called Land of Snow Leopard (LOSL), that SLC helped found. This network focuses on reviving indigenous people's cultural connections to snow leopards and giving them a stronger voice in conservation decisions.

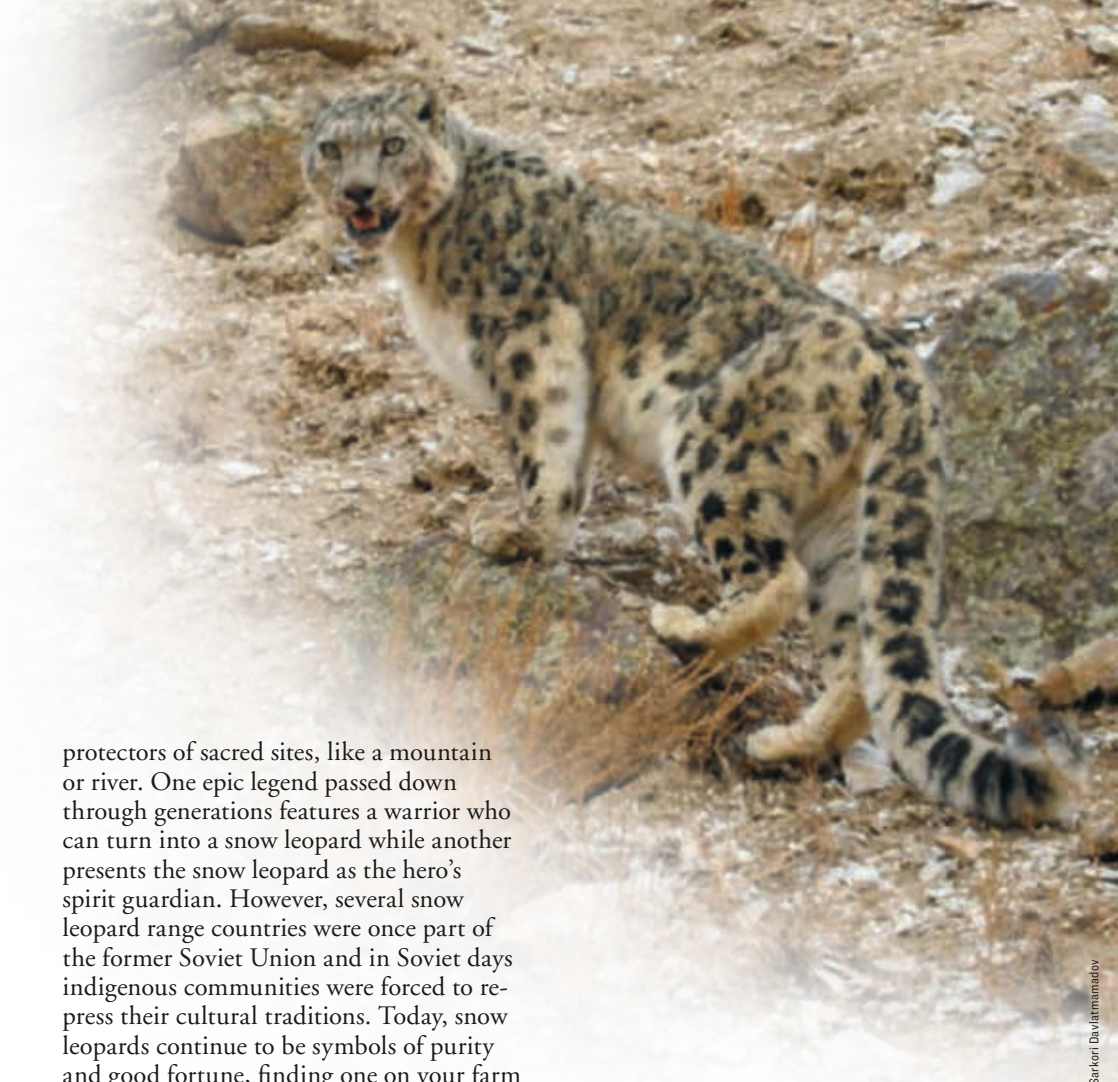
Many indigenous communities in Central Asia have a reverence for snow leopards. Some believe snow leopards are spirit

protectors of sacred sites, like a mountain or river. One epic legend passed down through generations features a warrior who can turn into a snow leopard while another presents the snow leopard as the hero's spirit guardian. However, several snow leopard range countries were once part of the former Soviet Union and in Soviet days indigenous communities were forced to repress their cultural traditions. Today, snow leopards continue to be symbols of purity and good fortune, finding one on your farm is actually a blessing (albeit paradoxically troublesome). This spiritual connection was a contributory factor in Firuz's decision to release rather than retaliate.

Most herding villages in Central Asia's mountains are poor. Tajikistan, where Firuz lives, is one of the poorest countries in the world—for any herder there to forgive a snow leopard and not seek revenge is a powerful testament to the strength and dignity of these people. As SLC and Land of Snow Leopard work with indigenous people to help fortify their cultural traditions, these communities are becoming increasingly passionate about protecting snow leopards. Now, when faced with an errant snow leopard in their village, more herders are choosing to release it into the mountains rather than retaliate. Each time they do they are showing other communities that snow leopards and people can coexist. ●

Thankfully, Firuz's livestock loss did not bankrupt him. Many in his community generously donated some of their animals to his herd.

Left: Firuz with his livestock herd.
Above: The snow leopard Firuz released.



Sarkori Davlatmammadov

A New Opportunity for Patagonia's Penguins



Global Penguin Society

For years, Clarita and Honorio met at the same wind-swept pebbled beach on the coast of Patagonia, Argentina. They found each other amongst the pushing and noise of the crowd and spent the summer together, parting ways when the season ended. Clarita and Honorio are Magellanic penguins, a species that breeds with the same partner every year, at the same location, in the same nest. Eleven years ago, Clarita and Honorio were one of just six pairs of penguins who founded a new colony in an area of Patagonia called Pedral. At the time, Pedral was a mess, but over the years the Global Penguin Society (GPS) helped transform it into a healthy coastal habitat. GPS is now on the verge of extending that success miles beyond Pedral.

When the penguins first arrived, Pedral was littered with trash, the fledgling colony was harassed by dogs, people burned their

nests. Clarita earned the title “mother of Pedral” by hatching the first chick born in the colony, but she did so while sharing her nest with a large plastic soda bottle. GPS turned things around by working with the local government and landowners to make Pedral a protected wildlife refuge. Their ongoing conservation efforts and their education and community engagement programs have helped Pedral become a beautiful, secluded coastline boasting an impressive 2,600 pairs of penguins. There is even a thriving eco-tourism industry that is bringing income into the area while protecting the colony.

This past year, GPS has been working with the provincial government on a project that will not only be important for the ongoing protection of the Pedral colony, it will benefit this entire region of Patagonia. They are working to create a

marine protected area that encompasses, but extends well beyond, Pedral. Creating a new protected area will be a significant accomplishment and will build on the extensive impact GPS is having along Patagonia's coastline. GPS has already helped establish the “Blue Patagonia” UNESCO biosphere reserve—which protects 40% of the global population of Magellanic penguins—and the Punta Tombo reserve, which protects the world's largest colony of Magellanic penguins.

These protected areas are enormously important as they don't just benefit penguins, they protect entire ecosystems. The new protected area around Pedral would

minimize negative environmental impact on the ocean and expand protection on land. It will cover almost 270,000 acres (larger than New York City and Washington DC combined) across land and water, protecting hundreds of different wildlife species.

Clarita still returns to Pedral each year, but when the breeding season is over she heads out into open ocean where penguins are vulnerable to pollution and commercial fishing vessels. A new marine protected area around Pedral will offer Clarita and many penguins in Patagonia a healthier ocean environment and increased protection so the colony can reunite when the breeding season begins again. ●

Left: Clarita and Honorio were breeding partners; they raised seven chicks together. Below: Clarita incubates the first chick hatched in the colony. Her nest was littered with trash before Pedral became a protected refuge. Background: GPS helped make Pedral a healthy coastal environment.



Global Penguin Society



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209 Mississippi Street
San Francisco, CA 94107, USA
Ph. (415) 202-6380

wildnet.org