

# First Ever Estimation Shows 718 Snow Leopards In India

## Why In News

- As many as **718 snow leopards** were reported as part of the first-ever scientific exercise that was carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).
- **Union Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change**, Bhupender Yadav, released the report during the National Board for Wildlife meeting held in New Delhi on Tuesday.
- The **Snow Leopard Population Assessment** in India (SPAI) programme is the first-ever scientific exercise.



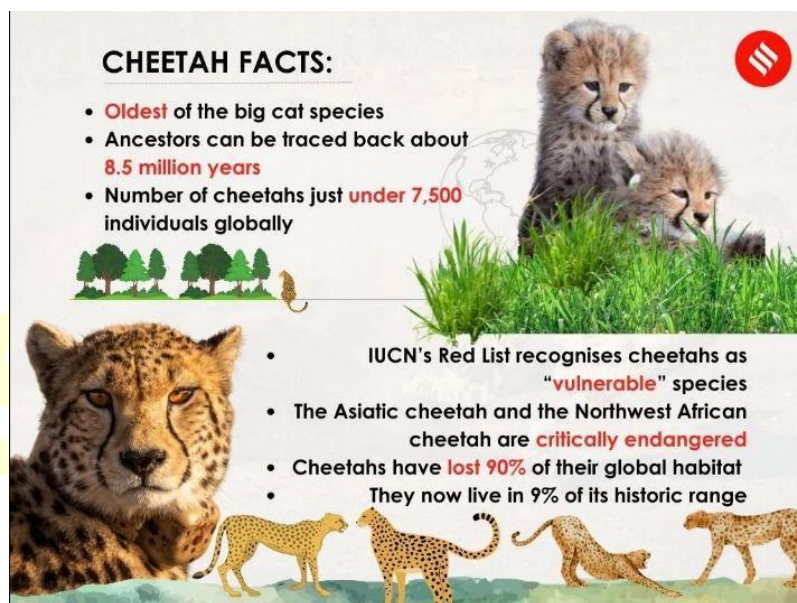
- The **Wildlife Institute of India** (WII) is the National Coordinator for this exercise which was carried out with support the support of all snow leopard range states and two conservation partners, the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru and WWF-India.



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## Report

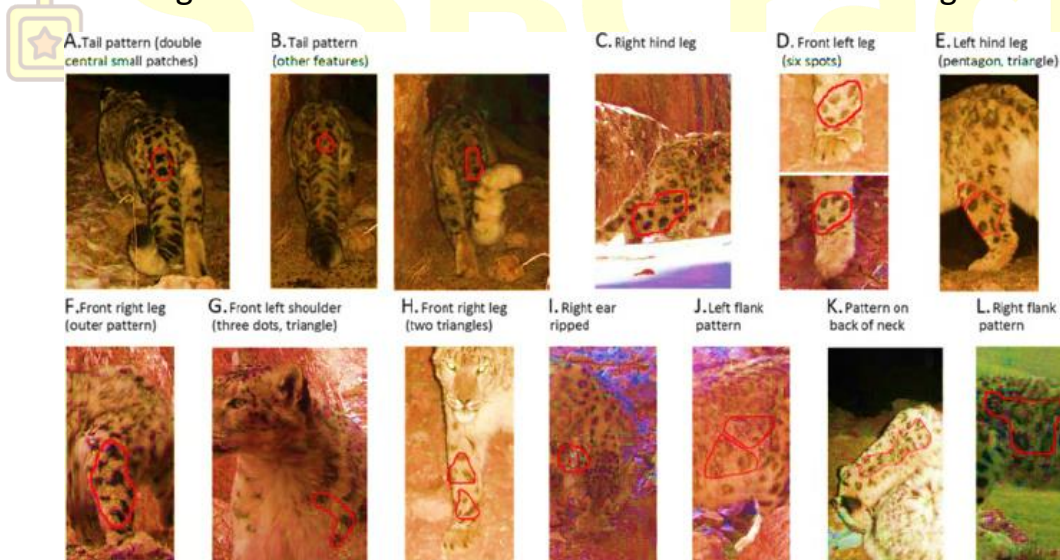
- After **the Cheetah project**, it is time to focus on another big cat, the snow leopard. This time around this elusive, mysterious, and equally majestic feline is an indigenous Indian species and the Union Environment Ministry on Tuesday shared a piece of information about it.
- Covering **approximately 107,594 Km<sup>2</sup>** of crucial snow leopard habitat across the trans-Himalayan region, including UTs of Ladakh and J&K, states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh, the exercise was conducted from 2019 to 2023.



- India has an **estimated 718 snow leopards in the wild**, according to a first-of-its kind, four-year long estimation exercise, the results of which were made public on Tuesday.
- Known to be an elusive cat and located in mountainous terrain that is hard to access, the numbers for the first time mark a base threshold for the animal's numbers in India.
- The **maximum number of cats were estimated to be in Ladakh** (477), followed by Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51), Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21), and Jammu and Kashmir (9).
- The current estimate puts the number of **Indian snow leopards from 10-15% of the global population**.



- The exercise involved setting up cameras, or ‘camera traps,’ in 1,971 locations and surveying 13,450 km worth of trails which teams surveyed for recording signs of snow leopards such as scat, hair and other body markers.
- Much like the approach used in surveys to estimate tiger numbers, States conducted the surveys and the **Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India**, an autonomous body of the Union Environment Ministry, used software and statistical methods to estimate the number of individual cats that are present but not caught on camera and combined them with those caught on camera.



- **“Essentially we use a similar statistical approach** to that being used in the tiger surveys for the last 20 years. It’s a rigorously tested equation and not dependent on guesswork,” V.B. Mathur, former head of the WII who is now involved with the study, told The Hindu.



- The **Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI)** began in 2019 and involves the World Wide Fund for Nature-India and the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru, along with the WII.
- The snow leopard is classified as **‘vulnerable’** by the **International Union for the Conservation of Nature** and faces threats such from free ranging dogs, human wildlife conflicts, and poaching.
- Scientific surveys to estimate their numbers began in the 1980s though the area over which the animal ranged was undefined due to a “lack of extensive nationwide assessments,” the Environment Ministry noted.



- Previous assessments have estimated the animal’s population at 400-700. Before 2016, approximately one-third of the range (around ca. 100,347 km<sup>2</sup>) received “minimal research attention.”
- Recent status surveys have significantly increased understanding, providing preliminary information **for 80% of the range** (about 79,745 km<sup>2</sup>), compared to 56% in 2016.
- “Unlike the tiger, poaching isn’t a major issue for snow leopard. The surveys actually led to a fair number of sightings. An interest by the Environment Ministry and global interest in the conservation of the species has resulted in these estimates,” Mr. Mathur said.
- The report also mentioned the need for establishing a **dedicated snow leopard cell at Wildlife Institute of India** under the Ministry, with a primary focus on

long-term population monitoring, supported by well-structured study designs and consistent field surveys.

- For the same, states and **UTs can consider adopting a periodic population** estimation approach (every 4th year) in the snow leopard range. These regular assessments will offer valuable insights for identifying challenges, addressing threats, and formulating effective conservation strategies.

