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India Presents Snow Leopard Science in Moscow, and Tests Whether IBCA Can Be More Than a Platform

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ENVIRONMENT

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GS3

GS2

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India Presents Snow Leopard Science in Moscow, and Tests Whether IBCA Can Be More Than a Platform

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

*On August 26, 2026, India participated in the **Russian-Indian Roundtable Meeting on Snow Leopard Study and Conservation** at the **A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution** of the **Russian Academy of Sciences** in **Moscow**. The meeting was held under the **Partnership Agreement** between the **Interregional Association 'Irbis'** and the **International Big Cat Alliance**, signed in **December 2025**.*

WHAT HAPPENED

The delegation from the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change**, including officials from the **Wildlife Institute of India**, presented advances in:

- **Population estimation** methodology
- **Radio telemetry**
- **Genetic analysis**

Participants included Russia's **Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment**, **Moscow Zoo** and **Rosprirodnadzor** (the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources).

WHY THE SCIENCE IS THE DIPLOMACY

The snow leopard presents a structural problem that makes it an unusually clear case for a GS3 answer.

The conservation unit is the species' range. The governance unit is the nation state. They do not align, and in this case they align worse than usual.

The snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) ranges across **twelve countries** of High Asia. That range crosses some of the **most militarised and least permeable borders on earth**: India and China, India and Pakistan, Afghanistan's frontiers, and the Central Asian republics. These are precisely the boundaries across which routine field cooperation is hardest.

A species that moves across a border cannot be counted twice or missed entirely without corrupting the estimate. If India and China each survey their side of the same massif with different methods and different assumptions, the numbers cannot be added, cannot be compared, and cannot support any claim about population trend.

This is why India's pitch is methodological rather than political. Standardised population estimation, genetic identification and telemetry are a **common currency**. Two states that disagree about a boundary can still agree on what constitutes a valid capture-recapture estimate. Science supplies a channel where diplomacy has none.

Genetic analysis is the most strategically useful of the three. Non-invasive genetic sampling, typically from scat, identifies individual animals without capturing them. That allows individual-level tracking of movement across a border **without any field presence on the other side**, which is the only method available where joint fieldwork is politically impossible.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The unresolved question is what IBCA becomes.

The **International Big Cat Alliance** was launched by India and is headquartered in India, covering **seven big cats**. It has two possible futures.

PATH	WHAT IT WOULD MEAN
A standard-setting and financing body	IBCA defines the survey protocols range states use, holds the data, and channels finance to conservation across the range. Real institutional weight.
An Indian-branded convening platform	IBCA hosts meetings and issues declarations, layered on top of existing arrangements without changing what any range state actually does.

The first path is now materially more likely than it was at launch, because IBCA has come into force as a **treaty-based intergovernmental international organisation** rather than remaining a memorandum-based coalition. A treaty body can hold assessed contributions, adopt binding standards and conclude headquarters and privileges agreements, and India has signed a **Headquarters Agreement** with it. That is a real institutional difference from a convening platform, though it establishes capacity rather than proving use.

The distinction matters because **the ground is already occupied**. The **Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Programme (GSLEP)**, launched at **Bishkek in 2013**, already covers all twelve snow leopard range countries and has a secretariat and an agreed framework. IBCA's snow leopard work necessarily overlaps with it.

A second alliance adds value only if it supplies something GSLEP does not, most plausibly **finance and technical standards**. If it supplies only meetings, it fragments an already thin institutional field, and range states with limited capacity end up reporting to two bodies instead of one.

The Russia partnership is a sensible test case, and its selection is not accidental. India and Russia have a working scientific relationship, no border dispute in this range, and complementary strengths: Russia has long-established field ecology institutions and Siberian range experience, India has recently completed a systematic national assessment. It is the easiest possible **bilateral** start. **The hard test is China**, which holds the majority of the global snow leopard range, and nothing in this meeting speaks to that.

A note on what a first national estimate can and cannot tell you. India's **Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAII)** produced the country's first systematic estimate. A first estimate establishes a **baseline**. It does not establish a **trend**, because there is nothing before it to compare against. Any claim that snow leopard numbers are rising or falling in India requires a second assessment on the same methodology, and that is years away. Statements that treat a baseline as evidence of recovery are a category error.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation; biodiversity; the role of technology in conservation.

GS Paper 2: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; India's role in **multilateral** environmental platforms.

Prelims angle: the snow leopard's IUCN status and legal protection, its Indian range states, IBCA's coverage and headquarters, GSLEP, and the SPAII framework. The IUCN status is a very common question and was **changed in 2017**.

Mains angle: *"Where the conservation unit is **transboundary** and the governance unit is national, scientific standardisation can substitute for political agreement. Examine with reference to India's role in big cat conservation."*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE MEETING:

26 August 2026, at the A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.

Held under the Partnership Agreement between the Interregional Association 'Irbis' (Russia) and the International Big Cat Alliance, signed December 2025. "Irbis" is the regional name for the snow leopard.

India presented advances in population estimation, radio telemetry and genetic analysis.

Participants: MoEFCC with Wildlife Institute of India; Russia's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Moscow Zoo, Rosprirodnadzor.

THE SNOW LEOPARD:

Panthera uncia. IUCN Red List: Vulnerable, downlisted from Endangered in 2017.

Schedule I, Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. CITES Appendix I. Listed on CMS Appendix I (Convention on Migratory Species).

Indian range states and UTs: Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh.

Twelve range countries globally: India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Russia.

Sometimes called the "Ghost of the Mountains". Unlike other *Panthera* species, it cannot roar, because of the structure of its hyoid apparatus.

India's Snow Leopard Population Assessment (SPA) is the national assessment framework, coordinated by the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun.

Project Snow Leopard was launched in 2009 by MoEFCC.

Hemis National Park in Ladakh is India's most prominent snow leopard habitat and the largest national park in India by area.

THE INSTITUTIONS:

International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA): launched by India in April 2023, at the 50th anniversary of Project Tiger; headquartered in New Delhi; covers seven big cats: tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, cheetah, jaguar and puma.

Five of the seven occur in India: tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard and cheetah. Jaguar and puma do not.

The Union Cabinet approved IBCA with one-time budgetary support of Rs 150 crore over five years, 2023-24 to 2027-28. It aims to reach 97 range countries.

IBCA has since come into force as a treaty-based intergovernmental international organisation, and India has signed a Headquarters Agreement with it.

GSLEP (Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Programme): launched at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 2013; covers all twelve range countries; the Bishkek Declaration is its founding document.

Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, is an autonomous institution under MoEFCC, established in 1982.

NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority) is a statutory body under the Wild Life (Protection) Act; WII is not.

WATCH THE TRAP:

The snow leopard is Vulnerable, not Endangered. It was downlisted in 2017, and the older classification is still widely repeated.

IBCA and GSLEP are different bodies. IBCA is India-led, covers seven big cats, and is headquartered in India. GSLEP is snow-leopard-specific, dates to 2013 and originated at Bishkek.

Jaguar and puma are in IBCA's seven, though neither occurs in India. The alliance is not restricted to Indian species.

The snow leopard cannot roar; the leopard, tiger, lion and jaguar can. This is a recurring Prelims distinction.

Source: India Presents Snow Leopard Science in Moscow, and Tests Whether IBCA Can Be More Than a Platform
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