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EDITORIAL

Status Report of Snow Leopards in India (GS PAPER-III)

Why in News?

- Union Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, Shri Bhupender Yadav released the report on the Status of Snow leopards in India during the National Board for Wildlife meeting held in New Delhi today. The Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAII) Program is the first-ever scientific exercise that reports Snow leopard population of 718 individuals in India.

More About the News

- The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) is the National Coordinator for this exercise that 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.
- The first step involved evaluating Snow leopard spatial distribution, incorporating habitat covariates into the analysis, aligning with the guidelines of the National population assessment of snow leopards in India by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) in 2019.
- This systematic approach included assessing the spatial distribution through an occupancy-based sampling approach in the potential distribution range. In the second step, Snow leopard abundance was estimated using camera traps in each identified stratified region.
- During the SPAII exercise, a total of 241 unique Snow leopards were photographed. Based on data analysis, the estimated population in different states are as follows: Ladakh (477), Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51), Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21), and Jammu and Kashmir (9).
- Recent status surveys have significantly increased understanding, providing preliminary information for 80% of the range (about 79,745 km²), compared to 56% in 2016. To gather robust information on Snow leopard numbers, the SPAII exercise surveyed habitats using a substantial network of camera traps.
- The report also mentions the need for establishing a dedicated Snow Leopard Cell at WII under the MoEFCC is proposed, with a primary focus on long-term population monitoring, supported by well-structured study designs and consistent field surveys.

Snow Leopard in India

- Highly adapted to life on the cold, rocky slopes of High Asia the snow leopard is a master of stealth and camouflage. Very rarely seen by humans, it has come to be known as the 'ghost of the mountains.
- It has also become an icon for these breathtaking and critically important landscapes, which house a



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diverse array of unique high-altitude species and provide critical ecosystem services for hundreds of millions of people.

- It is estimated that over 330 million people live within 10km of rivers originating in snow leopard habitat and are directly affected by the water flowing down from these mountains.
- The Government of India has identified the snow leopard as a flagship species for the high-altitude Himalayas.
- It has developed a centrally-supported program called Project Snow Leopard to conserve the species and habitats.
- The Project Snow Leopard was introduced in India by the Project Snow Leopard Committee instituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, in the year 2009 to safeguard and conserve India's unique natural heritage of high altitude wildlife populations and their habitats by promoting conservation through participatory policies and actions.
- In the IUCN-World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Species, the snow leopard is listed as Vulnerable. In addition, the snow leopard, like all big cats, is also listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), which makes the trading of animal body parts (i.e., fur, bones and meat) illegal in signatory countries.
- Several national laws in their countries also protect the snow leopards. In India, the snow leopard is listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, giving it the highest protection status under the country's laws.

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