The specialists of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, “Land of the Leopard” National Park, WWF and the Wildlife and Hunting Management Department of Primorsky Province have finalized the results of snow track census of Far Eastern leopard. The results exceeded all expectations – 48-50 individual leopards were detected, or 1.5 times more than 5 years ago.

“The Far Eastern leopard, the rarest cat on the Earth, is stepping back from the brink,” comments Dr. Yury Darman, head of WWF Russia Amur branch. “We had started the recovery program in 2001 and now can be proud of almost 50 leopards in the wild. The most crucial role is played by the establishment of large unified protected area with huge state support, which covers 360 thousand hectares of leopard habitats in Russia”.

The census produced four happy sensations and one alarming development.

The first sensation – according to census results, minimum leopard numbers were determined as 43-45 adult individuals and 4-5 cubs. In 2007, 27-34 leopards were recorded. While we cannot help but be gladdened by this fact, it is no reason to let down our guard. 50 is still a critically small number for long term persistence of population.

The second sensation – the leopard has moved towards north. For many years the Krounovka River was the northern border of the leopard’s range. Three years ago a lonely male left his tracks on the territory of Poltavsky Provincial Wildlife Refuge to the north of that river. This winter a female with a cub was found there. The appearance of the new northernmost cat family is leopards’ response to the successful organization of proper control over the Poltavsky Refuge by the Directorate of Protected Areas of Primorsky Province. Under the Directorate’s management the Reserve became part of the network of protected areas “Land of the Leopard”.

The third sensation – the leopard has moved towards the seacoast. One of the litters was found in an area where leopards never used to appear: in the reeds and shrubs of a river delta. This winter there was a high concentration of hare in such habitats, and due to the deep snow roe deer moved there as well. Poachers did not realize that wild animals were concentrating there, and so a mother and a cub spent a calm and safe winter by the sea side with plenty of food.

The fourth sensation – the leopard has moved to the south. One of the leopards was found on the border with the North Korea. No cases like this were recorded since the last century. It is quite possible that the animal crosses the border and temporarily inhabits the forests of China and North Korea. This fact highlights the importance of leopard habitat conservation in North Korea.

The alarming news - the winter census revealed 23 Amur tigers living on the territory, or double the number compared to 5 years ago. This is an independent grouping from Changbaishan population, which is distinct from the main Russian Sikhote-Alin population and plays a key role in Amur tiger restoration in China. It is believe that differing habitat preferences allow these two competing predators—tiger and leopard—to coexist. However, due to replacement of red deer by sika deer and low wild boar populations, the prey base of tigers and leopards in southwest Primorye has begun to more and more overlap. In such conditions, it is possible
A relatively large quantity of leopard prints were found along the border with China, but unfortunately it was not possible to conduct a simultaneous census in China. Last year, a minimum of 5 different leopards were photographed by camera traps there; Chinese specialists suggest that 8-11 cats inhabit the Hunchun, Wangqing, and Suiyang Nature Reserves, mostly in the vicinity of registered leopards in Russian border zone. "It is necessary now to accelerate the creation of a Sino-Russian transboundary reserve that would unify six adjacent protected areas encompassing 6,000 square kilometers and make possible the sustaining of a future population of 70-100 Far Eastern leopards and 25-30 Amur tigers," adds Dr. Yury Darman.

**AMUR TIGER SURVEY IN HEILONGJIANG PROVINCE / CHINA**

On January 16, 2013, WWF, Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Department and Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Industry Bureau conducted a joint survey of Amur leopards at the mountain areas of South Laoye Range. The survey symbolized the official operating of the wild Amur tiger/leopard monitoring network in Heilongjiang province, which is set up by WWF, Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Department, Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Industry Bureau and the Feline Research Center of State Forestry Administration. It aims to realize accurate in-time monitoring and tracking of wild Amur tiger/leopards in Heilongjiang province and to achieve Heilongjiang-Jilin and Sino-Russian interaction in Amur tiger/leopard survey and monitoring. “This was the first time to carry out an Amur leopard survey after 15 years since 1998 and the first time to achieve synchronous Amur leopard survey with Russian Far East. It was of particular importance for both China and Russia to determine the Amur leopard population within their borders. It also marked the significant milestone for the Sino-Russian cooperation in tiger/leopard conservation,” said Zhu Jiang, the director of WWF Northeast Program Office. The survey covered Suiyang Forestry Bureau, Dongning Forestry Bureau and Muling Forestry Bureau, all located at the mountain areas of South Laoye Range in southeastern Heilongjiang province. Adjacent to Wangqing Forestry Bureau and Hunchun Nature Reserve in Jilin province and bordering on Russia, those areas are the key potential habitats for wild Amur leopards. Before then, there has been no systematic, effective Amur tiger/leopard monitoring network in Heilongjiang province. Nor has a special survey been conducted. Thus not much is known about Amur leopards’ survival conditions. The information incompleteness or unscientific data collection methods fails to provide sufficient scientific support for the government to make policies for Amur tiger/leopards conservation.

The WWF Tiger/leopard Conservation Project coordinator Zhang Changzhi comments, "WWF hopes that through this survey, Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Department and Heilongjiang Provincial Forestry Industry Bureau can train their monitoring teams. We also hope that they can investigate the detailed information about wild Amur leopards at South Laoye Range so as to provide scientific support for conducting wild Amur leopard conservation action and policymaking as well.”

**EURASIAN OTTER’S TRACES HAVE BEEN RECORDED / MONGOLIA**

Eurasian otter is rarely seen by human. For the species conservation, research and monitoring results on its movements and migrations are vitally important. Therefore, WWF-Mongolia is assisting the Onon-Balj NP administration with its research. The NP administration’s researchers and rangers had a monitoring trip in Khoyyhon and Balj rivers in January 2013. They found and recorded some traces of the species on snow on a bank of harz (a patch of water which never freezes in severe cold). According to their records, the species individuals entered the harz and rolled over on snow. All these findings have been documented with photo. They recorded the site’s coordinates with GPS. According to their records, there are 4-5 individuals of Eurasian otter recorded. According to the local residents, some fish species spend winter in a pool near the river. According to re-search and monitoring findings, the Eurasian otter is often recorded in parts of the rivers nearby harz. Due to unstable water levels, the species is often moved from place to place.

1. Tracks found on the snow; 2. Traces of Eurasian otter

1. Following leopard’s trail; 2. Dr.Yury Darman is measuring leopard’s print; 3. WWF staff giving instructions for the field workers

Results of leopard census 2013
Tiger journey to Russia

China. January 29, 2013. On January 29, when the researchers of the Amur tiger monitoring project jointly carried out by the Feline Research Center of State Forestry Administration (the SFA-FRC) and Hunchun National Nature Reserve Reserve with the support of WWF were collecting data from the camera traps and changing batteries they detected the continuous footprints of a tiger. According to the experts, those footprint traces of 10.5 cm pad width were three days old, clear and intact. The monitoring team followed the prints and tracked down the tiger and entered Russia.

To know better of this Amur tiger’s range of activity and other tiger “secrets,” the team conducted backward tracing at the footprint chain on the second day. They found that the tiger came back from Russia. The animal entered Hunchun Nature Reserve, spining its territory and returned to Russia leaving a continuous and intact footprint chain of around 12.5 km long along the Sino-Russian border.

“We have been monitoring this Amur tiger for several months and started to acquire its show-up periods and environmental preferences. We have also set up camera traps in its favorite spots, from which massive valuable images, videos and other data have been collected,” says Lang Jianmin, director of Hunchun Nature Reserve.

The monitoring data in the past shows that the tiger enters and moves about in this area every month, as if patrolling the border. Experts have estimated that its home range covers both China and Russia as a tiger with “dual nationality”.

“The tiger is a typical cross-border species. The home range for a female Amur tiger is about 400–500 km². Therefore, the conservation and restoration of wild tiger populations requires joint, international cooperation from the two or more nations,” comments Dr. Jiang Guangshun, the standing vice-director of the SFA-FRC and a professor in Northeast Forestry University.

At present, the SFA-FRC and WWF are actively promoting the joint conservation of wild Amur tigers and the establishment of monitoring network between China and Russia. It is hoped that both sides can acquire accurate information of Amur tiger populations and their dynamic distributions through the sharing of population monitoring information and take joint, scientific and reasonable trans-boundary conservation measures.

“In Changbai mountain areas, the wild Amur tiger population in Hunchun-Wangqing district of Jilin province is linked to a population of dozens of Amur tigers in the Russian Far East. And in Wanda mountain areas, the wild Amur tiger population at Dongfeng-hong-Yingchun district of Heilongjiang province is linked to a larger population of 400-450 Amur tigers.

Therefore, these two districts are the key corridors for attracting Amur tiger populations in Russia to extend their habitats into China and to settle in China.”

Russia. March 8, 2013. On March 8, wildlife specialists of the Hunting Management Department of Khabarovsky Province and border guards tracked down a large male tiger (with pawprints of 11 cm wide) crossing the Sino-Russian border near Sredneussuriisky Wildlife Refuge created in Primorye in 2012 as an ecological corridor for tigers to move from Russia to China.

The tiger followed a herd of wild boars which was concentrated in the nearby untouched broadleaf forests on the right bank of the Ussuri River near border monument #106 and left Russia for China.

Russia. March 28, 2013. The tiger has come back from Russia to China having spent three weeks “abroad”.

“Strelnikovsky Corridor in Khabarovsky Province and Sredneussuriisky Wildlife Refuge in Primorye together form the only ecological corridor connecting the mountain system of Sikhote-Alin (Russia) and Wanda mountain (China). Only in this area do mountains surround the Ussuri River valley from both sides, creating a forest bridge between the countries, says Dr. Yuriy Darman, head of WWF Russia Amur branch.

That is why WWF insisted on preservation of the last tract of Korean pine-broadleaved forests bordering China. In recent years from 4 to 5 tigers were recorded on the Wanda mountain Range, including one breeding female. Moreover, in November 2011 a tiger was captured by an automatic camera in Dongfang-hong forest management unit, on the territory of which a new tiger reserve is planned as part of a Sino-Russian joint protected area. Without the addition of tigers from Russia the Chinese subpopulation is doomed to extinction”.

“We do not have radio-collared tigers to prove that this is one and the same tiger that either came back to Russia or stayed in China. Our Chinese colleagues have already set camera traps. Together with Sredneussuriisky Refuge administration we plan to do the same in the nearest future to be able to monitor tigers on journey”.

To achieve this goal, WWF is pursuing an active cooperation with the forestry departments in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces as well as the SFA-FRC in those two key districts. A series of joint efforts are made in monitoring network building, habitat restoration, prey-base population restoration and anti-poaching to develop Amur tiger settlement units and welcome Amur tigers home.

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FISHERS’ CLUB MEMBERS PROTECT TAIMEN / MONGOLIA

There is a number of anti-poaching methods in practice. One of them is to establish and run a club, where hunted species are joined by club members in the soums. These individuals become protectors, not fishers anymore. Their goal is to go illegal fishing. For now, their attitude and behavior has changed: they become protectors, not fishers anymore. For instance, they arrested over 10 illegal fishing incidents and informed to the law enforcement agencies. While fishing, the club members collect data. As per their records, they caught and released 270 individuals of Taimen. The biggest individual was 140 cm long and the smallest one was 30 cm among the species individuals caught and released.

Asking or requiring the fishers only “to protect” might be a useless approach. They need comprehensive knowledge and understanding on fish populations and proper fishing techniques. Thus, capacity building trainings (e.g. legislations and sustainability of the clubs) were organized for the local fishers under their club operations.

A meeting recently in March and assessed their performances. At present, 44 local fishers have joined the fishers’ clubs. The club members patrol in shifts according to the plans and contribute in conservation of fish species particularly rare and endangered species in the basin. For instance, they arrested over 10 illegal fishing incidents and informed to the law enforcement agencies.

SEVEN ORPHAN TIGER CUBS RESCUED IN WINTER 2012-2013 / RUSSIA

This winter 7 Amur tiger cubs were timely found in the forest and forcedly removed from the wild by the Primorsky Province hunting Department brigade on conflict resolution with the support of WWF.

In most cases orphan tiger cubs are the result of unmerciful poaching. After losing its mother a kitten is forced to approach human dwellings in search of food. In such cases the fate of young tigers depends on how quickly and professionally the humans act.

Three of them from one litter were found and caught in Yakovlevsky District of Primorye. WWF has paid to the Hunting Department brigade for the removal and has covered expenses of the vets who provided first aid to the cubs. After receiving veterinary care they were delivered to the rehabilitation center in the village of Alekseevka, Primorye.

Two other tiger cubs were caught near the village of Svetlogorie at one month interval. These two young tigers were transferred to the Utyos Rehabilitation Center in Khabarovsky Province. WWF has paid for the removal and for keeping the animals at the Center.

Two more cubs were caught in Kavalerovsky District. WWF has paid for their removal from the wild and for a surgery (amputation of a phalanx) as one of the cubs was trapped. These young tigers are being kept at one of the Hunting Department staff’s barn. Recently, of the cubs died of a disease caused by its malnourishment and traumas of the limbs and mouth cavity while another was transported to the Center in the village of Alekseevka.

FIRST TIGERS ON FIRST CAMERA TRAPS IN ANYUISKY NATIONAL PARK / RUSSIA

In early March, Anyuisky National Park has started monitoring the Amur tiger with the help of camera traps. These Park’s activities are part of the Northern Tiger joint project run by WWF Russia, WWF Sweden, and the Nordens Ark Zoo.

The Park’s staff plans to identify tigers and to monitor their movement across the whole Park’s territory which is 429,37 thousand hectares.

Right now 23 pairs of camera traps are purchased; some cameras are set to work in a test mode. WWF specialists conducted a two-day long training for the Park’s staff involved into these activities as field work in low temperatures requires special knowledge and skills. For the time being two Amur tigers were captured on films (see the pictures).

Also the camera traps will help to decrease poaching here and to conduct wild ungulates counts. Three of the cameras were set on supplementary feeding grounds on March 5 and in three days first pictures of wild boars, fox, and a tiger were made.

Supplementary feeding in the Park is being provided to wild animals during the whole winter. According to the Park’s head, 8770 kilograms of soy beans and oat were bought in 2012. Such care has brought good results. In the Park and the adjacent territories the rise in number of wild boars and other hoofed animals is registered. And the number of Amur tiger is stable and has a tendency to growth thanks to the Northern Tiger project.
On January 15 Vladimir Miklushevsky, Primorsky Province Governor, signed a decree on creation of a buffer zone in the Land of Leopard National Park thus making a symbolic present for the Year of Environment declared by the Russian President.

Borders and regime of the buffer zone covering 82 000 hectares of Amur tiger and Amur leopard habitats in three adjacent to the Park districts are defined by the Decree.

«The Decree has finished up the formation of protected area network for the Amur leopard, says Dr. Yury Darman, head of WWF Russia Amur branch. In fact, 360 000 hectares of the rare cat’s habitats are being now protected under different regimes i.e. all territories mentioned in the report presented by Sergey Ivanov on the meeting of the Russian Geographical Society in 2010».

What does the National Park need the buffer zone for? The Park borders with hunting societies territories where hunt is being done, with forestry units leases areas where logging is being conducted. But there are no borders for animals. Therefore, a buffer zone with special protected regime will mitigate the impact of human activities on rare predators and their prey, hoofed animals.

In 2001, when the idea of establishing a unified protected area for Amur leopard conservation was being shaped WWF Russia insisted on the necessity of introducing a special regime in hunting societies territories located in leopard’s habitats. WWF Russia negotiated and agreed with each land user the buffer zone’s border on the stage of documents preparation.

The buffer zone has been created without removal of land from owners and users but its protective regime restricts their activities thus creating more favorable conditions for leopard survival. For example,

- Collective hunt will be done only under authorization of specially trained hunter responsible for the whole hunting process.
- Dogs will be forbidden in the buffer zone.
- Hunt for fur animals and hazel grouse is allowed from October 1 till January 15 without the use of traps and self-activated traps.
- Each game user should take ungulates recovery measures like fixing supplementary feeding grounds, planting different crops, helping ungulates to survive in high snow. As roe and sika deers, wild boars are tiger and leopard’s main prey these measures will maintain ungulates number at a level sufficient both for hunters and rare wild cats.
- Control over the buffer zone regime observance will be done during joint raids of the Primorsky Province Hunting Department, Land of Leopard National Park, and hunting societies. It is important that from now on inspectors of the National Park can exercise powers in the buffer zone on a legal basis.

«The special regime does not reach villages, farms, and horticulture societies. It means that no one’s rights were disturbed. Control will be enforced in the forest helping leopard, tiger, and ungulates to survive, adds Dr. Yury Darman."

GTI and range Countries’ Planning Meetings for Tiger and Snow Leopard Conservation was part of the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties held in Bangkok (Thailand) on March 3-14, 2013. One of WWF Amur branch staff participated in the meeting as an official member of the Russian Government Delegation. Tiger range countries participants reported on the most successful results of the National Tiger Recovery Programs fulfilling. Russia’s representatives were asked to share the lessons learnt in decreasing poaching in the Amur tiger and its prey as well as in resolution of conflicts between tigers and humans.

Russia has a lot to share. Only in 2012 all governmental agencies involved in supervision over nature conservation both in Primorsky and Khabarovsky Provinces uncovered 2688 violations of hunting regulations; confiscated 411 illegal firearms (of which 78 were rifles) and 94 ungulates carcasses. Not less successfully cases on illegal hunting, storage and transportation across the border of the Amur tiger are being prevented though it is difficult to bring culprits to responsibility. At this rate, in 2012—2013, 7 criminal cases were opened in regards to poachers and individuals involved in the transport and trade of tigers and their parts. From these individuals 6 tiger cubs died in spite of rendered professional veterinary care and medical treatment and was placed under special care (death disease was caused by hyperthermia). Out of two caught grown up tigers a female was examined and then transferred and released into the wild in a new territory. An undernourished male carried the trap on his paw and thus could not hunt. After sedating the tiger received self-activated traps. After sedating the tiger received medical treatment and was placed under special care for exposure in Usurirsky Nature Reserve but unfortunately he died.

GTRP Proposed Key Progress Indicators (KPI) were actively discussed at the meeting. These indicators are derived from a first proposal from Russia and India as well as from indicators proposed in the various NTRPs. They supplement TRCs report on status of national Priority Implementation Actions (PIAs). Appliance of such indicators by each of the tiger range country will allow understanding whether they move the right way in the attempt to restore tiger population.
STORAGE AND TRANSPORTATION OF TIGER SKINS WILL BECOME A CRIME /RUSSIA

On March 2, President Vladimir Putin introduced a bill to the State Duma that will impose a tougher punishment for poaching and trafficking of endangered animals. The goal of the bill is to increase prosecution of poaching and trafficking, including storage, transportation, and trade of wild animals, including Amur tigers, leopards, and other rare and endangered species in the wild. The decision to develop the bill was taken at a meeting on tiger conservation on October 22 2012. It was presided over by Sergei Ivanov, the Chief of Staff of the Office of the President. WWF experts, who participated in the event, stressed that, despite the high profile given to the tiger conservation by the President of the Russian Federation, not a single poacher detained in the recent years received the deserved punishment. The maximum punishment for trade of tiger skins or other derivatives is a fine of 2,500 rubles (about 80 US dollars), while transportation and storage are not considered a violation at all.

In accordance with decisions made after the meeting, WWF developed proposals for the new bill. Together with proposals of the Ministry of natural resources and ecology, they formed the basis of the document submitted to the State Duma.

The bill proposes to introduce administrative responsibility for the storage and transportation of all species of animals or plants listed in the Red Book of Russia. In addition, poaching and trafficking (including keeping, purchase, storage, transportation, mailing and sale) of especially valuable wild animals will be classified as a crime. «Especially valuable wild animals» will include such species as Amur tiger, Far-Eastern leopard, and polar bear. Usually, they are the most desired object of poaching. According to the Administration of the President, from 30 to 50 Amur tigers are poached in Russia every year. From 1,000 to 1,200 of birds of prey — such as gyrfalcon, saker falcon, and peregrine falcon, — are killed illegally annually.

The draft federal law also criminalizes the smuggling of valuable wildlife and water resources, as well as parts and derivatives, regardless of the value of goods. Now only smugglers who are caught on shipment of rare animals worth more than 1 million rubles are prosecuted as criminals. At the same time, according to the Russian legislation, the damage from killing a tiger is half a million rubles. If, for example, a smuggler is caught with odd derivatives (parts of captured animals), it is difficult to estimate the cost of the shipment, and, therefore, initiate a criminal investigation. The new bill will close this gap.

WWF have insisted on tougher punishment for trafficking of endangered species for almost 15 years. The proposed bill closes a giant loophole in the nature conservation legislation.

CRIMINAL CASE ON ILLEGAL GYRFALCONS HUNTING INITIATED / RUSSIA

In early February Primorsky Police initiated a criminal case on illegal hunting on gyrfalcons which are enlisted into the Red Data Book of Russia. WWF Russia thinks that the culprits must answer in law not only for illegal hunt but also for the hard treatment, and for acquisition and sale of stuff intentionally gained against law.

Let us remind that in late December 2012 two lots of gyrfalcons (14 birds altogether) were seized at the airport of Vladivostok. The first lot of the rare birds was found in the luggage of a passenger from Petrovlovsk-Kamchatsky who has arrived at Vladivostok. Gyrfalcons were transported in cardboard boxes; they were tranquilized and wrapped around with a Scotch tape with legs tied and heads hidden under leather bands. When found five of the rare birds were already dead. Next day in a bag of another passenger bound to Novosibirsk six gyrfalcons packed into plastic tubes were revealed.

9 survived birds were taken for medical examination and rehabilitation by Primorsky Province Hunting Department and Biology and Soil Institute of the Russian Academy of Science. The rehabilitation efforts are being done with the support of WWF.

The gyrfalcons need time to regain ability to flight due to cruel transportation, considerable weight and muscles atrophy. Only one bird has taken its chance to be released on January 17 while all the rest are still recovering from harsh transportation conditions and long stay in cages.

BORDER GUARDS OBTAINED VOLUNTEER RANGER’S CERTIFICATES / MONGOLIA

The environmental and wildlife conservation requires active participation and input of everyone. In practice, volunteer rangers play a leading role in mobilization of local communities into conservation efforts. The volunteer rangers, who assume this important responsibility, should have certain levels of education and knowledge in the environmental and wildlife conservation in addition to willingness and hearth to protect the nature and wildlife. The minimum requirements to the volunteer rangers include “having basic understanding on environmental laws and regulations”. If they have good understanding on relevant legislations, it will be easy for them to handle and take immediate response actions when they arrest law violators without a panic. In this line, Onon-Bajl NP administration in support of WWF-Mongolia organized training for volunteer rangers. Training was attended by guards and officers (eight) of the frontier unit No: 0287. It is a good example and success for the frontier unit’s guards, who have main duty to guard the state border, because they join the nature conservation effort in addition to their main duty. On training, the participants were provided with concepts of environmental legislations, the technique to arrest trans-boundary poaching and collection of basic trans-boundary biodiversity monitoring data. Eight members of the frontier unit No: 0287 attended training have become volunteer rangers and were issued with volunteer ranger certificates. Training participants stressed that conservation of the environment and wildlife is a part of our obligations. “It is a matter of honor particularly for the army soldiers and officers, who took an oath. We have appropriate knowledge and understanding on the environmental laws. We have reached a common understanding on how to reduce and detect trans-boundary poaching problem. Also we were trained in basic methodologies to define locations, sizes, herd structures, ages, and sex of wildlife (mammal and bird) populations within the trans-boundary area and how to maintain the data and information collected in the bio-fund database”.

A few seconds before release

Volunteer rangers of Onon-Bajl NP
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND THE GIFTS OF THE USSURY TAIGA / RUSSIA

On the International Day of Forests the Amur branch of WWF Russia hosted a meeting of pine nut harvesting zone leaseholders with businesses leading in the processing and marketing of non-timber forest products. Primorsky Province, the southern Russian Far East, leads the country in the development of sustainable forest management enterprises. More than half of Russia’s 1.13 million hectares leased for the collection and processing of edible and medicinal forest products are located in Primorsky. The province’s Korean pine - broadleaf forests are prime habitat for the Amur tiger and provide livelihood for the region’s indigenous peoples and remote taiga communities. Since 2007, WWF Russia has facilitated leases of more than 600,000 hectares of valuable forests zoned as government pine nut harvesting zones to local businesses. For 49 years these businesses and the resident communities had the right to harvest and trade edible and medicinal plants, so-called non-timber forest products.

One of the main initial results of the leases was that all commercial logging immediately ceased and the risk of re-launching such logging has been considerably reduced, says Evgeny Lepeshkin, head of the Forest Program at WWF Russia Amur. – The next important challenge for the leaseholders is to build successful businesses, marketing the non-timber forest products of the nut harvesting zones to the world. Sustainable income from these “Gifts of the Taiga” will allocine professional management of some of the important tiger habitats in the region.}

The rich forests of the southern Russian Far East produce hundreds of edible and medicinal plants used in Oriental medicine and herbal treatments, for teas and dietary supplements, and many other products. But most of the unique wild plants from the richness of Primorsky’s vast forests are sold on domestic and international markets as “Made in China”, as that is where most of the processing of non-timber forest products takes place. Primorsky’s harvesting zone leaseholders are ready to change that pattern and install modern processing facilities following the highest global standards. But so far they lack serious investments to do so.

Leasing Korean pine harvesting zones protects the area’s Korean pine stands against logging as well as enables the development of new enterprises to process sustainably collected products from these forests. Our investment into non-timber forests product processing facilities was reviewed by experts from the International Center for Regional Development and presented for listing in the Program for Socio-Economical Development of Primorsky Province in 2013-2017, notes Aleksey Karasev, head of “Production and Procurement Base LLC from the city of Arseniev, Primorsky Province.

Today’s direct dialogue between large Russian and foreign businesses interested in the Ussury taiga’s gifts and the leaseholders of Primorsky’s nut harvesting zones is a first important step towards successful management of healthy forests through sustainable collection and sale of its non timber products to the world.

Our goal right now is to facilitate direct contact between forest leaseholders and the world’s main processors and traders of their products, comments Evgeny Lepeshkin. But we as a non-governmental institution together with the leaseholders also are working towards achieving significant changes in legislation necessary to make this forest use sector truly profitable and beneficial for all stakeholders.

Khabarovsky Province: Illegal Loggers Not Left Alone / Russia

Joint raids of Khabarovsk Provincial Forestry Department, Interior Affairs Department, and WWF’s experts held in southern districts of the Province in late 2012 struck a blow at the illegal loggers.

Routine raids made in January proved that last year joint efforts have had a positive impact: at least no illegal loggings were revealed early this year.

On November 29, not far from the village of Dolmi the raiders found among other illegally cut tree species 104 logs of Korean pine which is banned for logging since November 2010!

«Korean pine forests play a key role in the Amur tiger conservation, notes Andrey Sychikov, sustainable forestry projects coordinator at WWF Russia Amur branch, one of the raids participants. Of course, when we noticed lorries’ tracks we decided to find forest robbers while the trail was still hot no matter what.»

As a result, a criminal case has been initiated; 3 timber trucks, 174 logs of ash, spruce, oak, and Korean pine have been confiscated.

Joint raids, called Operation Forest, are conducted two or three times a year.
A YEAR FOR PROTECTED AREAS KICKED OFF IN AMURSKAYA PROVINCE / RUSSIA

2012 has been announced as the Year for Protected Areas in Amurskaya Province. The kick off activities were initiated by the Bars nature conservation brigade with the support of WWF.

«2012 is really unique due to conservation in the Province. 12 protected areas are celebrating jubilees this year. Among them are three nature reserves Zeisky, Khingansky, and Norsky which the two first have turned 50, while Norsky – 15», comments Svetlana Titova, protected areas program coordinator at WWF Russia Amur branch.

Amur branch of the Socio-Ecological Union, one of our partners among the grassroots in the Province, will have turned 50, while Norsky – 15».

In cooperation with Amurskaya Province Administration, Department of Fauna Protection and Protected Areas Directorate, high schools and nature reserves WWF has scheduled to commemorate these dates within the whole year. Namely, to hold a broad variety of awareness actions and practical measures assisting reserves’ staff. First activities took place just before the International Wetlands Day as many of the protected areas in the region.”

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A video message of Yury Darman, head of WWF Russia Amur branch, grabbed the audience attention during the opening ceremony. Yury who has been working in Khingansky Nature Reserve quite long and was one of founders of Norsky Nature Reserve, who has devoted 35 years to the protected areas of Amurskaya Province says that he is happy to know that nowadays the provincial system of nature reserves and wildlife refuges is one of the best across Russia and the Far East.

«Thanks to Leonid Korotkov, Amursky Province Governor, who made a present to the Planet Earth Governor, who entirely support the idea over 2 million hectares of protected areas have been created in the Province. WWF Russia has been supporting these activities for 15 years. I am grateful to those who work for the benefit of nature», notes Dr. Yury Darman.

FOREST TROUBADOURS CONTEST / RUSSIA

In the last day of the school vacations 17 groups representing schools of Dalnerechensky District had a competition in the village of Vedenka, Primorye. The Forest Troubadours contest was one of the activities in the joint working plan of WWF and District Education Department aimed at forest conservation and protection.

Tiger Day, seminars for teachers, mobile exhibition of kids drawings Forests for Life, publication of booklets and calendars with vivid stories about valuable tree species and environmental dates – these are other parts of the plan already fulfilled here.

Forest Troubadours contest is a spectacular continuation of the public awareness efforts. In their performances the kids presented not only forest problems but also the beauty and value for each and everybody on the Planet.

The boys from the group “Green tree” were so enthusiastic when singing four-line folk rhymes about dishonest timber men and were so sincerely grieving over the lost forest that used to grow near their village that all spectators as one shouted “Atabay!”

Kids from another school presented a real show telling the story about commercial logging in protected forests, comparing the value of a living tree and a dead one. These two groups shared “gold medals” and got voucher again for the environmental shift at the seaside.

THE VALUES OF PROTECTED AREAS WILL BE UNDERSTOOD AND ACCEPTED BY LOCAL RESIDENTS / MONGOLIA

The government pays particular attention to improved management of protected areas in the country. However, there are some challenges still seen. It would be related to low level of understanding on importance and values of areas among local communities. In practice, people usually safeguard and protect as they better know of values of an object. Therefore, improved perception and awareness is a solution for this. Within its communications campaign, WWF-Mongolia announced 2013 as the year of advocating values of Protected Areas. The campaign started with mobile campaign throughout the NP with open day events, lectures, and entertainment parties. The event involved 1850 individuals in duplicated numbers reaching 11% of total population of the area. Prior starting the campaign, a K-A-P (Knowledge-Attitude-Practice) survey has been conducted so that we could be able to measure changes in knowledge and attitudes. The survey findings were analyzed and processed with Avian Survey Pro. According to the findings, 12.7 per cent of the respondents assessed that they have good understanding on the PA (NP); while 43.6 per cent assessed that they have moderate level of understanding. So we have taken the percentage of the respondents, who provided a response “have good understanding”, as a criteria/impact of the public perception and attitude. Based on those findings, annual action plan has been developed with smart objectives and realistic outcomes.
LOCAL COMMUNITIES IMPROVED THEIR ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND AWARENESS DURING SNOW FESTIVALS / MONGOLIA

“A snow festival”. As you hear these words, you imagine in your mind the environment which is covered by snow and people including adults and children are amusing and playing with snow and making snow men and animals everywhere. We have organized this specific event for the 3rd year, on which people were called for nature conservation while enjoying the nature. Purpose of this year’s event was to disseminate Onon-Balj NP importance and values to the public through the entertainment, where people participated in a number of physical exercises, funny games, and contents. The festival was organized jointly by Onon-Balj NP administration, the soums’ Governor’s Offices, and WWF-Mongolia. For the soums’ residents, the festival has become an important desirable annual event. This year’s events organized in the soums were participated over 2200 individuals. The festival participants took place a number of contests such as a rope stretching, relay race, and sumo wrestling on snow. They also participated in “Questions and Answers” that was helpful to improve ecological education and awareness on Onon-Balj NP. As they participated in the one-day event, local communities improved their perception on Onon-Balj NP importance and values while spending the whole day with a full of joys and entertainments.

ECO CLUB MEMBERS ORGANIZED “EARTH HOUR” IN THE SOUM / MONGOLIA

Ecological education is greatly important to children. If they are well trained and brought up in their childhood, they will protect nature, environment and wildlife. In raising awareness among the children, eco club members play an important role. Local residents say many positive things such as “eco clubs in the soums in Onon River basin are active and energetic”. They did many useful actions for improved ecological education among the children in the last quarter. For instance, eco clubs “Green Island” in Dushal soum organized a contest “Golden Bell” among the school children, students of 5-8 grades. Primary school students were a main audience and fans and learned a lot about the environmental conservation from the contest participants. During the contest, “Questions & Answers” related to the nature, ecology, and wildlife was held. The audience actively took in it and it was an interesting moment for them. Members of eco-club “Green Island” take care of old aged trees in a forest in the soum and put tags on them. It was appreciated by many locals. Despite a small village without big lights, the eco-club members initiated to join the global event “Earth Hour” for the first time in this area. A small village went dark for the first time in the headwaters of Amur-Heilong. The eco-club members called for local people “keep the environment free of garbage” in order to protect the nature and parents and adults appreciate and join the effort.

On this occasion, an eco-club “Green Grove” organized a contest “Green Future is in Our Hand” to encourage school children to actively take part in the environmental conservation and to make their voices heard by local communities. The eco-club members showed an artistic performance with a topic of environmental conservation. It was much informative for school children. As spring is approaching, the eco-club members announced a contest to make litter bins by using second hand materials. These active and motivating efforts of the eco-club members are being supported by school administrations and cultural centers in the soums. Additionally, the eco-club members presented all the books and handout materials on the environment and conservation in the school library and provided the school children with an opportunity to get them for reading at homes with their reader’s cards. At their initiatives, kids collect and remove garbage and waste in areas surrounding their schools.

THE PROJECT BENEFICIARIES COULD IMPROVE THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND PROTECT NATURE AT THE SAME TIME / MONGOLIA

Onon River basin is a home to Chinggis Khan of the Mongolian empire in the 13th century. Therefore, it is abundant with historical sites. On other hand, Onon River basin is rich in rare and endangered wildlife (fauna and flora) species. It is also in Amur River basin, which is one of the eco-regions in immediate protection announced by the World-Wide Fund For Nature. The basin is nationally and internationally important. However, poverty among local people in the area was one of major concerns and, in turn, it has negatively impacted on the environment to certain level. Therefore, a project “Poverty Reduction through Community Based Natural Resource Management” was started in the basin with support of Government of Japan (Japanese Fund for Poverty Reduction) via the Asian Development Bank. To date, the project has come to its end. It has been successfully implemented in the basin by the WWF-Mongolia under the supervision of Ministry of Environment and Green Development for four years as started from July, 2009 to March, 2013. Main purpose of the project was intended to motivate local people to improve their livelihoods while conserving nature and sustainability using natural resources within their areas. The project’s intention was to enable local residents to protect nature and to improve their livelihoods at the same time. The project beneficiaries have realized that joining community organizations and groups is much effective rather than individual working to accomplish the tasks proposed by them. As the project is implemented in the basin, 902 households, beneficiaries of the project, have improved their livelihoods and 1039 households have had their savings at banks. Among 417 poor households joined community based organizations and groups, 208 households got rid of poverty. Most of them learned to make a number of products by using non-timber forest resources such as berries and to sew clothes. Supplied products to local markets, they have earned quite considerable amounts of incomes. Moreover, local residents have learned to produce 31 types of products e.g. dairy products, sewn clothes, embroiders, leather products, dried fruits, preserved vegetables, and bakery products. Local producers supply the packaged and bar-coded products to local markets. It is a part of success stories of the project beneficiaries. Although the project has come to its end, the local residents are happy that they learned a lot on how to run businesses and have had self-funding sources for their continued businesses.

There are 125 community based organizations joined by 3200 individuals of 1644 households in the basin. Out of these community organizations, there are 110 forest user groups. Members of these community groups improve their livelihoods while sustainably using forest resources. As performances of the forest user groups are getting improved, the forest management and conservation is improved. It is a success and inspiration for the community groups in the basin. As a result of the four-year project, local residents of Onon River basin become dedicated to nature conservation and have improved their livelihoods at the same time.
### CHINA: A FEATURE STORY

By Zhang Ruiting, a voluntary worker in WWF China Northeast Office

Episode 1: Rescue in the Forest

The heroes in the first story are Bao Heng and Guo Gai, two students of Prof. Jiang Guangshun at the SFA-FRC. Both of them are senior students of Northeast Forestry University. Baoheng’s nick name is “Baozi” (a traditional Chinese food which means steamed bread with fillings). He has been admitted to the graduate program of Northeast Forestry University and will officially be one of the last group of students to be supervised by Prof. Jiang. In this autumn, he will start his research life and the wildlife conservation journey as well. Guo Kai has participated in the national entrance examination to graduate schools and hopes to become a student of Prof. Jiang and do his bit in the conservation of Amur tigers.

On January 10, 2013, the survey team carried out a quadrat survey at Dahuanggou forest farm and Baoheng finished the first team, following the No.1 line transect. Dahuanggou is located at Changbai mountain areas. The winter in Northeast China is quite frozen and the forests there are covered with thick snow, about half a meter deep in average. It was a clear, sunny day, with a dark blue sky. The whole world was immersed in the stillness and serenity. Only the sunshine dancing on the treetops after hopping all the way down from the heaven. The quadrat was not quite tough on that day, yet No.1 line transect was the toughest one. The whole team went into the deep mountain at 8 o’clock in the morning. At around 1 o’clock, all the team members except Bao and Guo were back. They waited, and waited. Still, there was no sign of their returning. They had no cell phones with them, so other team members tried to contact them with the interphone, but no response returned. To 4 o’clock, it was getting darker and darker, and the temperature was becoming lower and lower.Everybody was worried about them, for this line transect was once visited by Amur tigers, with livestock attacked. The associate team leader Li Min couldn’t help weeping for them. Li is one the most outstanding students of Prof. Jiang and at present she is working for the Jiangxi Forestry Bureau. She is highly experienced both in scientific research and in field work and has always being very kind and considerate to others.

Extremely fatigued, the rest of the team decided to have dinner at the office building of the forest farm first and then search for the two lost members. Li called Prof. Jiang, who had went to Haerbin for temporary mat- ter. When Prof. Jiang learned the news, he was also quite worried about them. Yet he taught Li how to deal with this incident. Back to the office building, all the other team members, the director of Wangqing Forestry Bureau Mr. Zhang, the WWF Programme Officer and the manager of Dahuanggou forest farm Mr. Zhang had a meeting to work for a rescue plan. Before the field trip, the survey team agreed to return to the starting point if anyone felt uncomfortable and unable to finish the whole line transect. Therefore, the rescue plan was that two teams would take part in the rescue work: one team waiting at the destination and the other searching along the No.1 line transect from the starting place. With the plan settled, the rescue team grabbed at bit in a hurry, stuffed the backpacks with food and water and set off immediately. The first team waited for Bao and Guo at the destination of No.1 line transect with a campfire, including Mr. Zhang, Li Min, Li Zhihun and the driver. The second team was consisted of the guide of the forest farm and all other male members. They started from the departure place, calling out their names.

Guo and Bao both were born in the 1990s and this is the first time for them to participate in a field trip. Young as they are, they were quite persistent and strong-willed. They both had learned some wushu and now members of a wushu association. Prof. Jiang is often called the master of wushu in jokes, and Guo and Bao are his two brave generals. On January 9, 2013, after a day on the mountain, Baozi found his knee hurting occasionally at night. He has got an osteochondroma in the knee from a former injury. Not to delay the work, Baozi insisted on going onto the mountain with Guo Kai. The mountain was quite deep and covered with thick snow. Very often, they found themselves trapped by the large fallen woods midway. However, they hacked a way through the mystical forest. On January 10, around 10 o’clock in the morning, the pain in the knee aggravated for Baozi so that he could no longer exert himself or bend a bit. Using a twig as the walking stick and dragging his injured leg, Baozi finished the whole trip with great persistence.

Why did it take the two young men twice the time for others to finish the line transect? What kind of difficulties had them encountered?

The mountains were sheltered by a starring sky. So when the first team saw a flicker in the forest afar around 7 o’clock, they thought it was a star. Yet, the bright spot was drawing nearer and nearer and the voices of Guo Kai and Baozi came into their ears. It turned out that Bao Heng and Guo Kai were back, safely. Everybody felt relieved finally.

5. Foot prints of a roe deer, by Li Lianshan
6. Black Bear’s Feeding Platform in the Treetops, by Dong Hongyu

Not reconciled to convalesce at the office building, Bao went into the deep mountain again with Guo Kai and Li Hechun, forming a team called “Guo Bao Rou”, a popular local dish in Northeast China. During his stay, he had been providing support and helped with data entry. On January 18, Baozi left the survey team in advance to have an operation in his hometown Heze city in Shan-dong. Nevertheless, this young man was always wearing a bright smile on the face while sharing us the pain.
he experienced on January 10, the experience of falling into the icy river and the probability of the recurrence of the disease. His big smiles is full of vigor and brightness, being warm to the cold, frozen world. WWF carries out field monitoring and survey at the Amur tiger habitats in Heilongjiang and Jilin with its partners every year. Though every time the survey team will face with risks of all kinds, it is quite convincing that whatever risks occur, the field workers never complain about the tiredness or pains. They love Nature and the wildlife so much that they are willing to endure the extreme coldness and the deep snow in winter or the damness and the insect bite in summer. It is them, the lovely field workers, who are the heroes that help the devastated immense forests back to life.

Episode 2: The Father and Daughter

In the winter survey of WWF, we have two special members: a father and his daughter. The father is named Mr. Li Lianshan, a field worker at Xianghai nature reserve in Jilin province and a bird specialist. He has worked with WWF many times, helping WWF to conduct field surveys. The daughter is named Miss Li Hechun, a first-year graduate student in Southwest University, majoring on Philosophy. She is quite passionate about field survey and hopes to drill her will and lighten her mind.

You may wonder why the father and daughter joined the survey team. This would date back to the early 1990s. Mr. Li Lianshan is quite experienced in field work as was still a worker at Xianghai nature reserve, specializing at the waterfowl conservation, especially the red-crowned crane (Grus japonensis). Every morning, Li and Jiang got up very early to observe the waterfowls. They recorded a lot of valuable data about waterfowls and their friendship grew as time went by. Jiang had initiated the waterfowl conservation, especially the red-crowned crane. He has worked in Jilin province and a bird specialist. He has worked with WWF many times, helping WWF to conduct field surveys. This was his first time to participate in a volunteer activity organized by WWF and her first time in a field trip as well. Every time before entering the deep mountains, she would braid her hair into a plait, wearing the same jungle fatigues, the same rubber wula deep mountains, she would braid her hair into a plait, wearing the same jungle fatigues, the same rubber wula, and the same scotch-taped leggings as her father. And with a GPS and a twig-stick in the hands, he set out. Li can walk really fast and usually walks for six or seven hours a day without much rest.

Miss Li is 23 years old and a lovely, clever girl beloved by her parents. Actually, she is quite brave and independent. This was her first time to participate in a volunteer activity organized by WWF and her first time in a field trip as well. Every time before entering the deep mountains, she would braid her hair into a plait, wearing the same jungle fatigues, the same rubber wula and the same scotch-taped leggings as her father. And she joined with the survey team every day.

This year, the field trip was much tougher than last year. The mountain slopes were quite steep and the snow on the mountains was very thick. What’s worse, the typhoon “Bolavan” swept the mountains there last August and had blown many huge trees. The fallen trees made it much tougher for the survey team. Covered by deep snow and entangled fallen woods —— some above the ground and some under the snow, the mountains posed no possible paths for the survey team at all. On the whole trip, we need to watch out the traps in the snow, to climb over the tall trunks, to pass through the tangling branches overhead, or even to walk on the trunks with great care in that it’s almost two meters above the ground and with thick snow on the trunks. Though the trip was full of hardships, the schedule was still tightly arranged. At noon, we would make a fire on the snowy ground to toast the bread and sausage in our bags. The sunshine became even stronger when reflected from the snow. One can easily catch snow blindness (or photokeratitis). Meanwhile, the UV light can get the skins terribly burned. The father has become accustomed to the harsh wilderness and developed his own “mountain-climbing” rhythm. Yet, it was the first time for the daughter to live in the wild alone.

The fine skin was burned into red and bruises could be seen everywhere on her legs. She never spoke of the pain or the hardships and made it with great joy.

In the very beginning, I couldn’t understand why such a young and delicate girl insisted going into the mountain every day. It was unbelievably tough out there on the mountains. How couldn’t she just take a rest for a few days first? She told me that she wanted her parents to know that she was strong-willed enough to endure such kind of hardships. It was not until then when I realized that almost every one of us had once persisted in something that seemed too harsh on ourselves, only to tell our parents that we are independent and we can do by ourselves.

Some people may wonder why Chinese youngsters believe it is important. Well, parents in China tend to show their love to the children by attending to their every need when they are at home and by worrying about their life and happiness when they are away from home. So, it is important for young people to assure their parents that they are independent enough to take care of themselves and of the environment. Compared to the perseverant character, the recognition from others and the confidence from the parents, the hardships encountered or the pains suffered in the field trip means nothing at all. What a lovely and admiring girl!

Mr. Li is a man of few words. He had always worried about his daughter, yet he never told her this. Every time before setting out, he would told Miss Li to be careful and stay close to the team. He didn’t forbid her to participate in the field trip because of the various risks as some parents would do out of love for their children. He has given his daughter a more profound love —— respect, recognition and encouragement. This might well be the greatest wisdom of a father to help the daughter to be independent.

“If WWF plans to carry out a field survey in Northeast China next year, hope I can join again and do my bits for the Amur tiger conservation,” says Mr. Li. “I have been a wildlife conservationist for many years. The wild animals have become my friends and companions. I hope to communicate with in my own ways every day and wish they can have a better life. Also, I’d like to see more people involved in nature conservation. That is the reason why I allowed my daughter to be part of this. She can pass the values of nature conservation onto her friends and classmates.” WWF is a dream Utopia where everyone is working for their dream, either for WWF staff, or for invited specialists, or for volunteers.
When I got tired, I would stand for a while on the flattened trunks high above the ground to welcome the embrace of the sunshine, feeling like myself being a hero. The old saying goes that “it is easy to climb up the mountain but difficult to go back down it.” Well, I don’t think so. The journey down the mountains was full of joy; almost sliding all the way down the mountains with the walking stick dragged in hand, being absent-minded occasionally, taking photos and enjoying the lovely scenery. The snow was so thick that it did not hurt at all when I fell down. And even if I could not walk steadily and slide for a distance, I was still progressing toward the destination.

At about one o’clock in the afternoon, we set up a camp fire to prepare our lunch, which was bread and sausages. The meal in the wildness was quite simple but special. In such a cold forest, we were very lucky that we didn’t need to look for food and could make a fire and have some hot food.

On that day, we climbed over four large mountains and three valleys: Yidao valley, Erdao valley and Sandao valley. We covered five sampling points: Yidao valley, Erdao valley and Sandao valley. We covered five sampling points: Yidao valley, Erdao valley and Sandao valley. We covered five sampling points.

The sun was setting. Whereas I sweated a lot earlier in the day, now I felt awfully chilly from within. The heavy breathing took away my body water so that I felt desperately thirsty and my throat seemed to dry up. So I cleared away the snow on the surface, took out some in the middle and put it into my mouth. Now that I think of it, it was so much like quench a thirst with poison. The icy snow water lowered my body temperature and overthrew my stamina. Every a few steps, I would stop for a while. When I got to the mountain-top, the sun was already under the horizon, only a light still remaining in the sky.

On the way down the mountain, it was already as dark as it would be. The road down the mountain seemed endless. I didn’t know how far I had walked in the company of the moonlight and the flashlight or how many miles was still in front of me. My strength was already exhausted while two voices echoed in my brain. One said, “I’m so tired and there’s just no need to climb to the end. What I going to do is sit down on the ground and have a good cry. Maybe I can ask Mr. Li or the guide to carry me on their back.” The other encouraged me, “it is already the last part. All that I need to do is clench my teeth and keep on walking. The toughest parts have been conquered. So don’t give up. Don’t stop. Don’t cry.”

When I was walking, my two legs would become so weak that I just fell down automatically. Then I would pick myself up or be picked up and continue to walk. The

Through the ocean-blue sky, the pure whiteness and the solemn woods, Nature seemed to tell us that she can release forceful anger in the cruelest way and revive the harmonious Nature through endowing it with infrangible grandeur and sublime as well. Different from human destructions, Nature bestows the power of harmony upon the diversified landscape and wildlife on the earth. Even in this wildness live Populus diversifolia, lizard and cactus. The vast areas of fallen trees indicate the cycling of life. When spring returns, the little saplings will get more sunshine and gradually grow into towering trees year by year. However, man-made destruction is quite different. Everywhere visited by the devastating civilization turns into wilderness, creating no spectacular landscape and leaving no signs of rebirth. It is like a blazing fire burning out the dry firewood, leaving nothing but ashes, with the phoenix missing as in the story of Phoenix Nirvana.

A Happy Day

The most painful part for me was the last mountain, located between Erdao valley and Sandao valley. When we arrived at Erdao valley, it was almost three o’clock in the afternoon. I felt that I was running out of strength. Knowing that we must climb over the big mountain to reach the destination, I suddenly felt heavy-hearted. After having crossed a deserted timber-transportation road and entered the painstaking woods again, I found myself approaching the physical limit and couldn’t feel confident in myself any longer. On the up to the mountain, my legs had become as heavy as lead and could barely support my body. I had to depend on my arms, the strong, reliable walking stick and the trees on both sides. I didn’t know how many times I had stopped to have a rest. Thanks to the encouragement and patience of Mr. Zheng and Mr. Li, I managed to keep pace with the team.

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When I got tired, I would stand for a while on the flattened trunks high above the ground to welcome the embrace of the sunshine, feeling like myself being a hero. The old saying goes that “it is easy to climb up the mountain but difficult to go back down it.” Well, I don’t think so. The journey down the mountains was full of joy; almost sliding all the way down the mountains with the walking stick dragged in hand, being absent-minded occasionally, taking photos and enjoying the lovely scenery. The snow was so thick that it did not hurt at all when I fell down. And even if I could not walk steadily and slide for a distance, I was still progressing toward the destination.

At about one o’clock in the afternoon, we set up a camp fire to prepare our lunch, which was bread and sausages. The meal in the wildness was quite simple but special. In such a cold forest, we were very lucky that we didn’t need to look for food and could make a fire and have some hot food.

On that day, we climbed over four large mountains and three valleys: Yidao valley, Erdao valley and Sandao valley. We covered five sampling points: Yidao valley, Erdao valley and Sandao valley. We covered five sampling points.

The sun was setting. Whereas I sweated a lot earlier in the day, now I felt awfully chilly from within. The heavy breathing took away my body water so that I felt desperately thirsty and my throat seemed to dry up. So I cleared away the snow on the surface, took out some in the middle and put it into my mouth. Now that I think of it, it was so much like quench a thirst with poison. The icy snow water lowered my body temperature and overthrew my stamina. Every a few steps, I would stop for a while. When I got to the mountain-top, the sun was already under the horizon, only a light still remaining in the sky.

On the way down the mountain, it was already as dark as it would be. The road down the mountain seemed endless. I didn’t know how far I had walked in the company of the moonlight and the flashlight or how many miles was still in front of me. My strength was already exhausted while two voices echoed in my brain. One said, “I’m so tired and there’s just no need to climb to the end. What I going to do is sit down on the ground and have a good cry. Maybe I can ask Mr. Li or the guide to carry me on their back.” The other encouraged me, “it is already the last part. All that I need to do is clench my teeth and keep on walking. The toughest parts have been conquered. So don’t give up. Don’t stop. Don’t cry.”

When I was walking, my two legs would become so weak that I just fell down automatically. Then I would pick myself up or be picked up and continue to walk. The
road seemed to have no end. Yet I knew I would manage to reach the destination on my own. I would go back to the dormitory of the forest farm. I would have a hot meal and rest on the warm kang (a heatable brick bed in North China). Nevertheless, the horror and despair seized me again and time again. I was frozen all over and could only remember to walk, without knowing where the destination was, just like a dead-alive person.

The only light for me was Mr. Li and the faint light from his flashlight. Finally, we arrived at Sandao valley and I sat on heels, trembling ceaselessly and crying soundlessly under the cover of the darkness. The only thing in my mind then was that after the body had experienced the unprecedented ordeal, all the anxiety, the pain and the great joy needed to be diluted by tears.

Right then, voice came from the intercom that Liu Mingyu had fallen into half-frozen river for a shot. I forgot my fatigue immediately and talked to Liu’s team with the intercom. Not until I knew that he had been sent back from a shortcut by the guide and was having a rest in a tractor with warm air did I feel relieved. How dangerous it is to be wet all over at minus 20 degrees centigrade or lower. After about half an hour, the tractor came to us. We can go back to the dormitory of the forest farm now!

Reflections and Thoughts
Before setting out, Mr. Li asked if I could do this. I answered that I was a perseverant person. That’s true. I didn’t have a strong constitution and even seemed delicate, but thanks to my perseverance, I made it. I was not in a position to say that I was a tough person in that I felt anxious, panicked and backed up at the last mountain, losing the mood to enjoy the scenery. However, Mr. Li, the guide and I were a team. If I stopped, the whole team would stop and the first team would fail its task. How was I going to face others in the survey team, especially Mr. Li and Mr. Zheng who had helped me all along? Well, that’s why I didn’t give up. Before all those experiences, I had long believed the driving force for man to move forward came from the inner mind. If one was strong-willed, they could overcome all difficulties and advance bravely. Yet, if I entrust my decision to my inner voices, I might as well fail to complete the journey. I cannot deny that there are actually people, probably lots of them, who are worldly, strong-willed and rational enough to make difficulties vanish invariably. But for me, it was our team that saved me on that day. It was their perseverance and patience that led me down the last mountain.

Because of the WWF winter survey, I become aware of the difficulties of wildlife conservation. While those conservationists have never been the heroes in documentaries on wildlife conservation, they are the unknown, ordinary heroes. Some of them are forest rangers or conservationist in forestry farms; some are faculty members or students in colleges and universities. They spent most of the year in the wilderness, fighting against ticks in summer and the extreme coldness in winter. Their efforts in Amur tiger/leopard and ungulate conservation and research outweigh their meagre income in every means. They love the land most genuinely and willing to sacrifice for the prosperity and diversity of the life forms.

A one-week survey is not enough for me to know much about wildlife conservation. Yet I know that those difficulties will not become the barriers for Amur tiger/leopard conservation or the conservation of other wildlife. The significance of the WWF winter survey lies not only in the research findings but also in that those findings can promote consensus on the conservation of Amur tiger/leopards and their habitats among the related governmental departments, forestry industrial companies, nature reserves and local communities. With joint efforts, the vision of TX2 — to double the number of Amur tigers by the next Tiger year — can turn into reality. Amur tiger/leopard conservation is a historical task which needs long-time efforts. It is the redemption for the devastation of Nature and the over-exploitation of natural resources. The blue print is already unfolding and the conservation work has already started. Everything is promising.

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