Snow leopard conservation

Why in news?

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The conservation status of snow leopard has been changed from “endangered” to “vulnerable” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

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What are the characteristic features of Snow leopards?

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- These are rarely sighted cats that live in the peaks of central Asia including the Himalayas and Russia’s remote Altai mountains.
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- Their habitat covers more than 1.8 million sq km, across 12 countries and usually found at elevations of 3,000-4,500m.
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- Their coats change with the seasons from a thick, white fur to keep them warm and camouflaged in winter, to a fine yellow-grey coat in summer.
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- They are threatened by poaching for their fur, infrastructure developments and climate change.
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- In India this animal habitat is in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.
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What are the criteria for endangered status?

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- An observed, estimated, inferred or suspected population size reduction of ≥ 50% over the last 10 years or three generations

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- Area of occupancy estimated to be less than 500 km^2,
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- Population size estimated to number fewer than **2500 mature individuals** witness a continuous decline
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- Population size estimated to number fewer than 250 mature individuals.
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- Quantitative analysis showing the probability of extinction in the wild is at least 20% within 20 years or five generations
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- The current move is based on the criterion that it crossed the threshold number of 2500
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What will be the impact of the downgrade?

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- The factors that pose a threat to the species, like trafficking live animals in Central Asia, and hostility from communities because of its attacks on livestock, remain unchanged.
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- New research indicates that even when wild prey is available, the attacks on livestock by snow leopards have been on the rise.
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- The bigger challenge of loss of habitat owing to changing climate patterns needs continuous conservation efforts.
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- There is no clear knowledge about its population health, in remote habitat in the alpine zones of the Himalayas and trans-Himalayas.
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- There are possibilities of trafficking of this animal in Central Asia, and hostility from communities because of its attacks on livestock.
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- A more fundamental worry is over the likely loss of habitat owing to changing climate patterns.
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- So the downgrading might send a wrong message and the governments might shift their focus away from the conservation efforts.
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- It is vital that the momentum of conservation should not be lost merely on account of the technicality.

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What should be done?

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- The existing conservation must be strengthened by enlarging protected areas in all the range countries.
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- Studies on the leopard’s vulnerability have to be intensified.
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- The task of monitoring its entire habitat of high mountains must speeded up.
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- The reasons for hunting livestock must be dound out to insulate the owners from losses.
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- They should be encouraged to move away from traditional pastoral grazing.
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- Incompatible activities such as mining and human interference in their habitats should be kept out.
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Source: The Hindu

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