

U.S. and Russia Unite for Conservation



Muskoxen were transferred from Nunivak Island, Alaska, to sites in Russia in a successful attempt to establish the species in other parts of its former range.

Photo Credit: USFWS

by Steven Kohl

Under a broad-ranging cooperative program involving federal and state agencies, zoos, botanical gardens, and research organizations in the United States and Russia, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has worked since 1975 with its counterparts in the Russian Federation (former Soviet Union) to conserve imperiled species. Both nations share biological information, conduct field studies, exchange rare animals and plants, reintroduce species into areas of their historical range, and work to boost the genetic diversity of species that are reduced to critically small populations.

The effectiveness of this collaboration, carried out by FWS Region 7 (Alaska), the FWS *Wildlife Without Borders* Russia Regional Program (WWBRussia), and numerous other programs under the auspices of the U.S.-Russia Environmental Agreement, is best illustrated through the following examples:

Muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*)

After determining that the historical range of this species included arctic Russia, the FWS arranged for the capture of 40 muskoxen on Nunivak Island, Alaska, for transport to the Taimyr Peninsula and

Wrangel Island in Russia. Bolstered with muskoxen from Canada, there are now stable populations of 2,000 in Taimyr and 600 on Wrangel Island.



A female Przewalski's horse born at the Smithsonian's National Zoo Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia.

Photo Credit: Meghan Murphy/Smithsonian's National Zoo

Przewalski's horse (*Equus caballus przewalskii*)

By 1967, this species, also known as the Mongolian wild horse, had disappeared from its native range, leaving the world's zoos and conservation centers as its last refuge. In 1982, in an effort to enhance the species' genetic diversity, one male and two females from the New York and San Diego Zoos were exchanged for three animals from the Askania Nova Reserve in Ukraine, home to the former Soviet Union's largest captive herd. Some offspring of the exchanged horses have been reintroduced into the wild in Mongolia.

Amur tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*)

Though reduced by the mid-1980s to a critical level of only 200 to 300 tigers in the wild, this subspecies reproduces well in captivity. To address the problem of inbreeding in American zoos, three Amur tigers were transferred from the Moscow Zoo to the New York, Omaha, and Indianapolis zoos in 1983. This exchange enhanced the genetic diversity among tigers maintained in captivity. A series of grants from the FWS *Wildlife Without Borders* Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund to Russian nature reserves and non-governmental organizations for conservation and educational activities has promoted the protection of Amur tigers in the wild. The most recent census numbered the wild population at 400 to 500 individuals.

Sturgeon (*Acipenseridae* spp.)

Responding to concerns about unsustainable fishing to supply the global caviar trade, all of the world's sturgeon species were placed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1998. Attention quickly focused on sturgeon inhabiting the Caspian and Black seas, and the U.S. and Russia began to share information on three species of particular concern (beluga, stellate, and Russian sturgeon). Both governments began to discuss problems associated with overfishing and poaching, monitor trade in caviar and other sturgeon products, determine the genuine or counterfeit status of product labels, perform genetic analyses of caviar shipment contents, and cooperate in criminal investigations. In 2004, the FWS listed the beluga sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act as threatened, and Russia placed restrictions on export of sturgeon caviar products in 2005. Both countries will continue to work on sturgeon conservation.

Endangered plants

During more than 30 field expeditions in both countries from 1976 to 1991, American and Russian botanists collected seeds and propagules (vegetative parts of a plant, such as a bud or other offshoot, from which a new individual may develop) of nearly 3,000 rare and endangered native floral specimens for experimental cultivation. This project should result in a more secure future for identical or closely-related species that grow in both North America and Eurasia, including coniferous and deciduous trees, perennial plants, irises, and tulips.

Aleutian Canada goose (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*)

This subspecies, which once populated not only the Aleutian Islands in the U.S. but also the Kuril Islands (stretching from Kamchatka to Sakhalin in Russia), has been reintroduced into Russian parts of its historical range. One of the Endangered Species Act's success stories, the Aleutian Canada goose was delisted after its recovery in the U.S. Under a program that began in 1992 with the transfer of 19 captive geese to a breeding facility in Kamchatka, there is now a population of more than 100 birds in the Kuril Islands. Recent sightings have come from as far south as Japan.

Saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*)

Saiga abundance in Kalmykia (Russia) and Central Asia has declined by 97 percent since the early 1990s, due mainly to poaching for the animal's horns and meat. In an attempt to reverse this dramatic decline, the U.S. and Russia are collaborating on ecological and veterinary field studies. Since 2005, WWB-Russia also has provided nearly \$50,000 in grants to erect border signs and strengthen ranger patrols in protected areas occupied by saiga. The funds are helping to outfit a conservation education center for local communities.

Polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

In 2000, the U.S. and Russia signed an Agreement on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population. The agreement defines the role of national governments and native communities in maintaining sustainable numbers of this threatened species. The U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission met in 2009 to establish a scientific working group. It will monitor the approximately 2,000 polar bears in this population and recommend annual limits for subsistence use.

In each of these cases, cooperation between the FWS and counterpart agencies in Russia, in partnership with a host of non-governmental organizations, has helped to ensure a free flow of information and promote efforts to protect imperiled fauna and flora.

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For more information on the Wildlife Without Borders-Russia program, visit: www.fws.gov/international/DIC/regional%20programs/russia/russia.html