

Terms of Reference for the North-East Asian Big Cat Network

1. Introduction

Big cats are apex predators that contribute significantly to the integrity of terrestrial ecosystems through regulating prey populations. Their population survival has been under growing and complicating pressure, including but not limited to habitat fragmentation, low prey density, low genetic diversity, restricted gene flow within small and isolated populations, and susceptibility to multi-host disease, from a variety of anthropogenic pressures, which includes, inter alia, land-use change, prey competition, poaching, and climate change. Considering the ecological significance and their threatened status, Amur Tiger, Amur Leopard, and Snow Leopard have been identified as flagship species in the Nature Conservation Strategy of NEASPEC which was adopted at SOM-12 in 2007¹.

The range countries of these flagship species consist of China, Mongolia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation in the subregion, which have taken various conservation measures to protect their populations and habitats, thereby improving ecosystem integrity and ecological connectivity. The cross-border nature of the majority habitat ranges for all three species requires enhanced transboundary conservation and effective cooperation on joint monitoring and research, information sharing, capacity building, to effectively improve the protection of Amur Tiger, Amur Leopard, and Snow Leopard and their habitat ranges across territories of the range countries. In response to the challenges and needs emerged as a consensus amongst experts in the past activities, such as maintaining effective cross-border collaboration, and with support from NEASPEC member States, the Big Cat Network shall provide a strategic basis for transboundary scientific cooperation through exchange of information and scientific-technical collaboration, taking into account various initiatives and instruments that exist in the subregion.

2. Aims and Objectives

The Network is a voluntary, need-driven mechanism intended to complement, and not duplicate or replace, existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, protected-

¹ Available at https://neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Publication_SavingNatureConservation_2_0.pdf

area cooperation arrangements, and national frameworks related to big cat conservation. It is created to support the protection of Amur Tiger, Amur Leopard, and Snow Leopard and their habitats in North-East Asia with the following objectives:

- a. To promote big cat conservation, including its scientific and technical aspects, in a transboundary context within the subregion.
- b. To enhance and further develop information and experience exchange in transboundary big cat conservation.
- c. To promote knowledge and awareness-raising on big cat conservation in the North-East Asian subregion.
- d. To enhance capacity building for the emerging and current conservation community as well as affected local communities in the context of big cat conservation in the North-East Asian subregion.
- e. As needs evolves and as agreed by members, to act as a structured mechanism for addressing transboundary big cat conservation issues in North-East Asia.

3. Geographical Scope and Target Species

The geographic scope of the Big Cat Network includes:

1. Coverage of place-based in-situ conservation – the habitats of all three target species in the territories of China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mongolia, and the Russian Federation, constituting the core scope of the Network,
2. Coverage of scientific and technical support, observation, and other extended engagement – the North-East Asia subregion and relevant entities from a wider geographical range as the members see fit, with ex-situ conservation cooperation considered only where it directly supports the conservation of wild populations.

The three target species of the Big Cat Network include Amur Tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*), Amur Leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*), and Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*), which are the feline flagship species identified by the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy. Additional species may be included in the Network, subject to agreement of the NEASPEC Senior Officials Meeting.

4. Core Programme

The core programmes are to:

i. Voluntary exchange of relevant information and data within the subregion, in accordance with the existing national legislation, institutional mandates, confidentiality requirements, data ownership, and prior consent of the relevant data holders, covering:

a. Appropriate level(s) of population, habitat, genetic, and prey-based data at appropriate levels of detail relevant to the cross-border conservation of the target species, including population distribution and dynamics, habitat status, genetic variability, prey density, and ecological connectivity, at intervals and in formats to be agreed by participating institutions and relevant data holders;

b. Information on major threats to the target species and their habitats, including but not limited to, prey depletion, human-wildlife conflict, habitat fragmentation, infectious diseases, climate-related risks, and other anthropogenic pressures;

c. Information on conservation and monitoring technologies and relevant national policies currently in use or under-development; and

d. Information on experience and challenges in research on the conservation of the target species in a transboundary context.

ii. Promote knowledge exchange and capacity building for big cat conservation in the subregion through:

a. Science-based consultations among national scientists and experts;

b. Capacity building for effective habitat and population management for all three target species, such as technology and knowledge transfer amongst emerging and frontline conservationists in the subregion, local community engagement, public awareness-raising; and

c. Exchange of information on human-wildlife conflict and community engagement to improve understanding of conservation measures and the management of nature reserves and national parks.

iii. Promote cooperation with relevant institutions, programmes and mechanisms and synthesize their results in accordance with the Network activities, including:

a. Contribution to the advancement in developing subregional joint methodologies for monitoring each target species that enables a greater level of data compatibility and cross-border data sharing;

b. Participation in coordinated conservation activities for the target species and collaboration with existing programmes and frameworks, including national networks, international platforms, and multilateral initiatives; and

- c. Support to the enhancement and maintenance of transboundary ecological corridors connecting habitats of the three target species in range countries, for instance, between China and the Russian Federation and between Mongolia and the Russian Federation.

5. Organizational structure

The organizational structure of the Big Cat Network includes the following: the Steering Committee, the Species-oriented Working Groups, and the Secretariat.

Thematic groups can be formed under the nomination of the Steering Committee depending on the needs to advise and review specific technical assessments. The Steering Committee shall report to the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) of NEASPEC for the final decisions.

- i. Steering Committee – as the steering body, to plan, monitor and review activities under the Network, and promote science-policy linkages through guiding dialogues and technical assessments. Each member State nominates one expert per target species for the Committee, which may meet on an annual basis. The Committee may also recommend activity direction and organizational structure to SOM.
- ii. Working Groups – as a group of research and conservationists dedicated to each target species, who are nominated and endorsed by respective member States and dedicated to support the technical and scientific work of the Network.
- iii. NEASPEC Secretariat – to provide overall programme coordination and administration of the Network and report any updates or recommendations to SOM for review and/or adoption.

6. Membership

The membership of the Network consists of the following:

- i. Members – experts, scientists, and conservationists from central and local management authorities of protected areas for the target species, related national academic or scientific institutions, and NGOs from the NEASPEC member States, namely China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.
- ii. Observers – relevant entities that could play a role for the dispersal and migration of the target species, including governments of the neighboring range countries of

the target species, big cat conservation programmes, initiatives, and projects, and international organizations relevant to the objectives of the Network from outside the North-East Asia subregion.

7. Budget

Activities of the Big Cat Network may be supported by the NEASPEC Core Fund, subject to available resources and approval through the NEASPEC programme planning process. Additional financial and in-kind support may be sought from member States and other sources on a voluntary basis.

8. Role of Member States

Participation in the Big Cat Network is voluntary, serving as complement existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, protected-area cooperation arrangements, and national frameworks related to big cat conservation. Member States may actively participate in and contribute to the development of the Big Cat Network, such as through exploring potential financial or in-kind contributions necessary for the effective functioning of the Network.