

Amur Heilong Ecoregional Conservation Programme Evaluation Brief & Impact Analysis

Project Facts

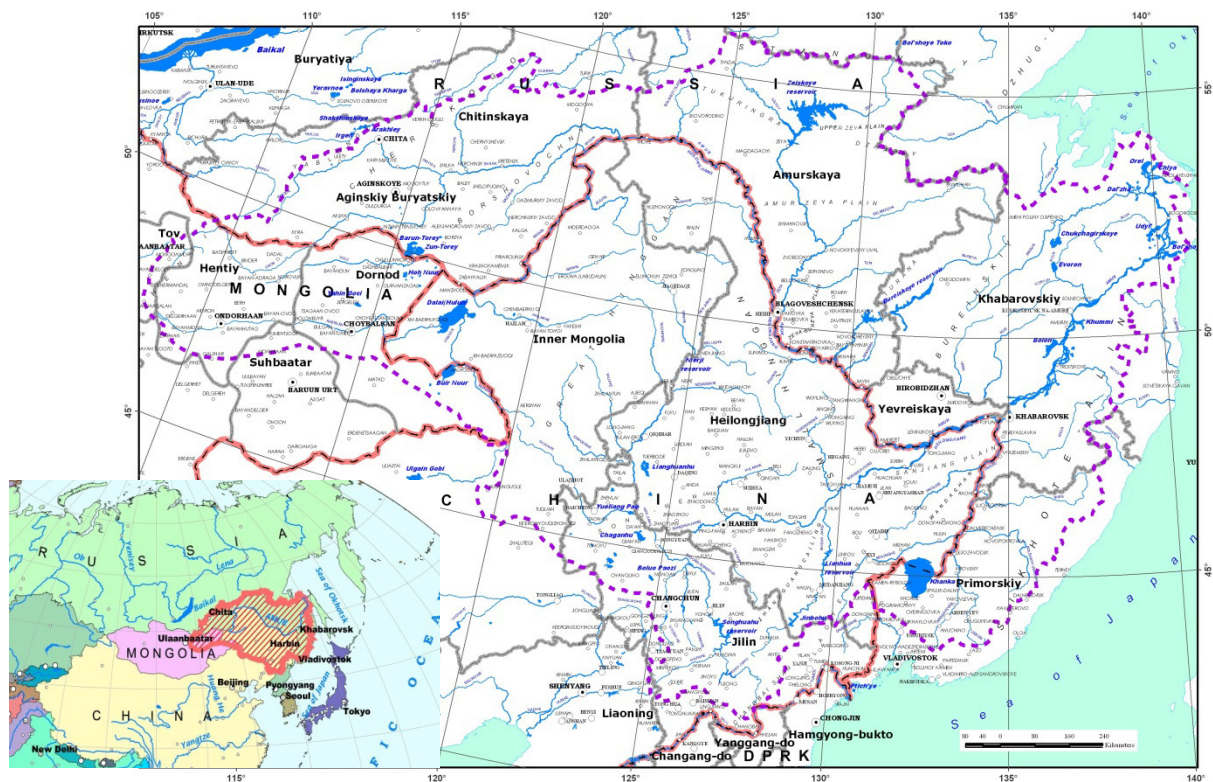
Programme Name	WWF Amur Heilong Ecoregional Program
Programme Location	Russian Far East, North East China, North East Mongolia
Programme Volume and Donor	12.5 mio. euros from different donors
Programme Duration	Mid-2012 to mid-2014
Date of Evaluation	January 2014
Authors of the Report	Tim Jones (lead) and Dan Cao

Background

The Amur Heilong Ecoregional Programme (AHEC) delivers conservation results for one of WWF's priority places – the Amur Heilong ecoregion (defined as the catchment of the Amur River). Straddling the border between northeastern China and the Russian Far East, the Amur-Heilong region contains one of the most biologically diverse temperate forests in the world, and is a key habitat for the critically endangered Amur leopard and tiger. WWF is working to ensure that these species and many others are protected in this vast yet fragile environment.

The programme has been running since 2005, when the first PIA (Project Implementation Agreement) was signed. It has achieved significant results in each of the countries that make up this ecoregion (Mongolia, Russia and China). The WWF offices in each of these countries implement comprehensive field programmes, for which they bear individual responsibility. During the current implementation phase, an integrated ecoregional plan was developed. This plan forms the basis for strengthening cooperation across international borders. The three programme leaders – who, together, make up the Executive Team (ET) – jointly implement the Amur-Heilong Ecoregional Programme and are responsible to their respective headquarters in Ulaanbaatar, Moscow and Beijing. The ecoregional plan also forms the basis for a PIA between all supporting offices in the WWF Network, and provides for a single, comprehensive reporting system.

An evaluation of the current PIA was commissioned by WWF Germany on behalf of the Steering Committee of the Amur Heilong Ecoregional Programme. It was conducted in early 2014, and included a field mission to Russia, China and Mongolia from 2 to 18 February 2014.



Figures: Location and borders of the Amur Heilong Ecoregion

Summary of Findings

The Amur Heilong Ecoregional Programme has resulted in notable achievements in all three countries – especially in Russia, where AHEC builds on a longer history of activities and is being implemented through a larger and better-resourced team than in China and Mongolia. Many of the achievements showcase transformational outcomes, and/or concrete steps towards future transformational outcomes. These include:

- Transboundary establishment of protected areas (‘Source of Amur’, a 1.1 million ha protected area in Mongolia and Russia), supplementing the considerable expansion of protected areas at the national level;
- Transboundary and high-level governmental cooperation (China/Russia) for tiger/leopard conservation – the Amur Tiger population is stable in the wild in Russia, and there are signs of an increase in China, while the Far Eastern Leopard population is increasing in both countries (see impact analysis below);
- Populations of other AHEC ‘flagship’ species, namely Oriental Stork *Ciconia boyciana* and Taimen *Hucho taimen*, also increasing;
- Securing vital new legislation (e.g. major strengthening of federal forest legislation in Russia, enabling far more effective conservation measures);
- Working effectively with river basin management bodies (adoption of Onon-Balj River Basin Management Plan in Mongolia; decision in principle for no hydrotechnical development in Russia in the main Amur channel until 2020 at least).

While most activities have been carried out through partnerships and it would not be accurate to portray successes solely as the achievements of WWF/AHEC, most positive outcomes would not have happened at all, or would have happened much more slowly, without the crucial role played by WWF/AHEC (see impact assessment below).

In spite of significant achievements, the Programme does not yet adequately address several crucial drivers of ecoregional change, notably:

- water management infrastructure;
- expansion of intensive agriculture in China;
- international trade as a driver of illegal logging in the Russian Far East.

The design and structure of the existing Programme and the corresponding Monitoring framework are overly complex, which causes difficulties for implementation and coordination between donor offices, the wider network and non-WWF stakeholders.

Resourcing for AHEC is uneven, with financing of activities in both China and Mongolia inadequate to meet FY12–FY14 Workplan Goals or overall, long-term programmatic goals. This is a major challenge for the Steering Committee and wider Network to address. It is especially regrettable that Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) in China had a zero budget for the whole of the FY12–FY14 triennium in spite of IRBM being one of the fundamental modules of AHEC. The funding gap was exacerbated by the political sensitivity of transboundary issues, although there are many aspects of IRBM that could be implemented wholly within Chinese territory. The funding base for AHEC in Mongolia is narrow and vulnerable. This is not in conformity with the requirement for consolidating and making sustainable the achievements witnessed to date in conserving the critically important ecosystems that constitute the Amur–Heilong headwaters, nor with the overall scope and ambition of the AHEC Programme.

The Steering Committee is not yet providing sufficient guidance and leadership with regard to:

- profiling of AHEC achievements within the WWF Network;
- internal and external fundraising;
- translating decisions/agreements reached at Steering Committee meetings into action.

Interactions between the Executive Team members have not yet reached the frequency or level of substance needed to drive the programme at a ecoregional level on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, exchanges/other capacity building initiatives for technical and field teams are not sufficiently well developed, meaning that there is a basic lack of awareness about what counterparts are doing. This results in significant deficits with a view to the potential sharing of experience, expertise, lesson learning and other forms of synergy.

Example impact analysis for the Amur leopard

The Far Eastern Leopard, or Amur Leopard *Panthera pardus orientalis*, is restricted to the forests of the Russian Far East (principally the Primorsky province) and North East China (Jilin province). The IUCN Red List classifies it as Critically Endangered. WWF Russia, and especially the Amur Branch Office, has been working on leopard conservation for more than 15 years and launched a major intervention programme to save the last surviving animals from extinction in 2001. Since 2005 WWF's efforts to conserve the Far Eastern Leopard have been an integral part of the Amur Heilong Ecoregional Program, which also covers the leopard's range in North East China.

While the circumstances of each WWF project and programme are different, and the relatively straightforward linkages between activities and impact in this example impact analysis may not be so evident in other cases, there are various success factors identified here that could be replicated elsewhere.

Intervention logic

In 2001 WWF set out the following priorities for its interventions:

- Secure leopard habitats by a) establishing an extensive, unified protected area with sufficient staff and state funding, b) gaining conservation concessions to promote 'leopard-friendly forestry' and forest restoration via intensive fire-prevention efforts and planting of Korean pine (*Pinus koraiensis*) seedlings.
- Stop poaching through improved legislation, much better enforcement and constructive partnerships with 'model' hunting estates and the federal border guard service.
- Increase ungulate prey base in partnership with protected areas and model hunting estates.
- Promote livelihood alternatives, including eco-tourism and non-timber forest production, that would benefit from the conservation of leopards and their habitats.
- Change attitudes by working closely with federal and provincial authorities, hunters and foresters, and by campaigning to raise public awareness, especially among school children.
- Ensure transboundary cooperation for leopard conservation along the Russia–China border.
- Implement monitoring, using the best available methods, of leopards, their prey base and their habitats.

Importantly, these priorities:

- responded logically, strategically and in an integrated way to the main threats to the surviving leopard population (loss of habitat, poaching, lack of prey).
- recognised that conservation interventions could only succeed if accompanied by actions to secure stakeholder support and wider public support.
- were mutually reinforcing in relation to WWF interventions to conserve the Amur Tiger, facing similar threats overlapping ranges.

Specific achievements

The size and range of Russia's Far Eastern Leopard population is monitored through regular winter censuses (tracks in snow), camera-trapping and radio-collaring supported by a detailed database of known individuals. The leopard population (according to expert analysis of the 2013 winter census results) is currently estimated as 48–50 individuals in Russia, thus already exceeding WWF's target for 2020. This represents a significant increase over the 25–34 individuals recorded by the 2007 census. The species' range is also expanding to the north and south, including on the Chinese side of the border.

The currently available evidence (anecdotal, e.g. from camera traps) indicates that the population of the leopard in North East China is also increasing. This is likely the result of positive conservation measures taken in Russia (in particular) as well as in China.

Key Ecological Attribute (KEA)	Indicator for KEA	FY11 Baseline Status Russia	FY14 Goal Russia	FY14 Actual Status Russia*
Population size	Number of Amur leopards as inferred from Amur leopard track density	25–34	40–45	48–50
Prey density	Number of ungulates as inferred from ungulate track density	20000 (38.3/10 km ²)	22,000 (45/10 km ²)	No data (as no snow cover in 2013/14 winter for tracking)
Quality of habitat	Number hectares within PAs (all IUCN categories, including conservation leases)	232,759 ha (187,474 ha in PAs 45,285 ha in leases)	298,000 ha	399,024 ha (379,924 ha in PAs 19,100 ha in leases)
Range	Number hectares of occupied leopard habitat (measured in winter)	520,000 ha	520,000 ha	550,000

Table: Monitoring data related to intervention logic. Data provided by Y. Darman, WWF Amur Branch Office, June 2014

This impact can be related to the following outcomes:

- The Amur Leopard Conservation Strategy for the Russian Federation was adopted by the Federal Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in November 2013, while a detailed Action Plan for the period to 2022 was approved in December 2013. The Federal Government has also approved a leopard reintroduction programme for the Lazovsky nature reserve, to establish a second population where the species went extinct in the 1970s. WWF succeeded in actively engaging Vice-Premier Ivanov as a strong supporter of leopard conservation. Now he (and his special foundation) is the major vehicle for leopard conservation in Russia.
- Establishment in 2012 of the 'Land of the Leopard' National Park (261,869 ha), which, together with its buffer zone and Kedrovaya Pad nature reserve, protects 70% of leopard habitat. With an annual government budget of 3 million euros, the park is sufficiently funded. It also took over ownership of the WWF visitors centre. An additional buffer zone for the 'Land of the Leopard' National Park comprising 81,918 ha, prepared and lobbied for by WWF, was established by decree of the governor of Primorsky province in January 2013.

- The Russian Far East system of protected areas now covers about 400,000 ha in a continuous 250-km belt along the border with China. WWF initiated the establishment of the first nature reserve (Hunchun) in China for tigers and leopards. WWF Russia prepared the documentation for the establishment of a Sino-Russian nature reserve covering more than 500,000 ha, providing a habitat for 100–120 Far Eastern Leopards and 35–40 Amur Tigers. WWF has played a leading role in securing these achievements, and has put leopard conservation on the agenda of Sino-Russian consultations at the highest level.
- Monitoring shows that the populations of three key prey species for leopards and tigers, namely, wild boar, roe deer and Sika deer, have increased since 2003 in areas where WWF is working closely with hunting leases.
- WWF has played a critical role in fire prevention (significantly decreasing the trend since 2010 thanks to increased patrolling, establishment of firebreaks, and the training of fire-fighters) and in the planting of one million Korean pine seedlings for Far Eastern Leopard habitat restoration.
- Leopard friendly forestry: WWF and its partner signed a 49-year lease for 43,000 ha of forests for sustainable forestry, firewood production for local people, the harvesting of non-timber forest products and charcoal production. In addition, 1.5 million Korean pine seedlings have been planted to regenerate degraded forests.

Factors for success in the implementation phase (2001 to present day) have been:

- Clear, objectively verifiable and periodically reviewed conservation goals/targets with effective monitoring: The present overall goal for leopards in the Russian Far East states: “*To attain a population of 45 or more Amur Leopards in southwestern Primorsky Province by 2020*”.
- Consistency of approach: the priorities listed above have been maintained for a period of more than a decade.
- Availability of significant resources: funding from the WWF Network has directly supported key activities and helped to leverage additional investment from external donors and Russian authorities.
- Partnership and scaling up: WWF recognised from the beginning that its leopard conservation goals could only be achieved through building effective partnerships and a scaling up from short-term demonstration projects to long-term, sustainably resourced programmes operated by Russian authorities.

Attribution of impact

Almost all conservation interventions for the Far Eastern Leopard have been initiated by WWF and it is highly unlikely that the results achieved to date would have occurred in WWF’s absence. Of course, the interventions that have been carried out in partnership with other actors, and it is impossible to conclude that a particular result or measurable impact/outcome occurred as a direct result of WWF’s activities alone. What can be said with certainty is that WWF’s interventions for the Far Eastern Leopard have generally been:

- Logical
- Strategic
- Mutually reinforcing
- Well-integrated with wider WWF (and non-WWF) conservation programmes
- Effectively implemented in partnership with others, and
- Well-monitored on the basis of clear goals with objectively verifiable indicators.

It is important to recognise that many of WWF’s interventions for the conservation of Amur Tigers have benefited Far Eastern Leopards (and vice versa) both directly and indirectly. This is a particularly good example of how a focus on a few flagship species can have far-reaching beneficial consequences. All of this combines to suggest that the strongly positive trends in the population and range of the Far Eastern Leopard can be attributed in large part to the interventions of WWF. In the opinion of the author, the visible correlation is strong evidence of efficacy, and it is unrealistic to look for more specific ‘proof’.

Project performance rating table

Criteria	Description of Strong Performance	Rating/Score	Evaluator Brief Justification
Relevance	The programme addresses the necessary factors in the specific programme context to bring about positive changes in conservation targets	Good	AHEC is addressing key drivers of ecosystem change. Yet on some drivers, the <u>intensity and scale of engagement</u> is not yet sufficient to bring about wide-spread positive changes. AHEC spans three countries with fundamental differences in context. This makes designing a programme that is both <u>relevant</u> and <u>practical</u> for the three countries a major challenge.
Quality of Design	The programme has rigorously applied key design tools (e.g. the WWF PPMS).	Fair to Good	PPMS was applied as a tool in designing the AHEC strategy at the ecoregional level. However, while the ecoregional targets are focused on biomes, the country workplans were designed by thematic modules, making it difficult to assess performance against them.
Efficiency	1. Most/all programme activities have been delivered with efficient use of human & financial resources.	Excellent	What has been achieved by the teams in the three countries is excellent in comparison with the relatively modest human and financial resources available. The team in China is currently too small and under-resourced to have a significant impact beyond tiger/leopard conservation.
	2. Governance and management systems are appropriate, sufficient, and operate efficiently.	Fair to Good	The set-up appears to function reasonably well, but the Steering Committee needs to focus more on key strategic issues (sustainable funding, internal promotion of the achievements of AHEC). The Executive Team should meet more often to better understand one another's viewpoints, priorities & challenges and should ensure that relevant information is effectively shared.
Effectiveness	1. Most/all intended outcomes/objectives/intermediate results regarding key threats were attained.	Good to Excellent	The majority of FY12 to FY14 objectives were reached in all three implementing countries. There are big success stories to be told; these need to be communicated more effectively. Some gaps are mainly related to funding/resource shortfalls, especially in China and, to a lesser extent, in Mongolia.
	2. There is strong evidence indicating that perceived changes can be attributed wholly or largely to the WWF program	Good to Excellent	Interviews in all three countries showed very clearly the significant and sometimes decisive role played by WWF. There is clear evidence that many activities would not have happened at all, or would only have happened at a much slower rate, had the AHEC Programme not existed. Still, it is also important to recognise the critical role played by partners at all levels.
Impact	1. Most goals – i.e. desired changes in the status of species, ecosystems, & ecological processes – were realised.	Fair to Good	The scale and ambition of the overall ecoregional goals and biodiversity targets to 2020 means that a long-term perspective is needed. The three-year indicators show good progress towards realising some of these goals and targets, but it is too early to expect sustainable impacts to have been realised.
	2. Evidence indicates that perceived changes can be attributed wholly or largely to the WWF program.	Good to Excellent	WWF is working together with multiple partners and it would be arrogant to say that the significant successes achieved are “wholly” due to the AHEC programme. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence showing WWF's vital role as a catalyst, driver and facilitator of action.
Sustainability	1. Most or all factors for ensuring sustainability of results/impacts are being or have been established.	Good	WWF offices in all three implementing countries show a clear understanding of the steps needed to make AHEC activities sustainable. Yet their ability to take those steps depends on the lasting commitment of the WWF Network. There is a risk of achievements being lost, should the network decide to downscale the priority assigned to AHEC.
	2. Scaling up mechanism put in place with risks and assumptions re-assessed and addressed.	Fair to Good	Scaling up remains a challenge, requiring continued engagement. In some cases, activities to address key drivers (e.g. agricultural expansion in China) are only now getting underway and are at a small scale. However, there appears to be a high potential for upscaling – given time and adequate resources.
Adaptive Management	1. Programme results are qualitatively and quantitatively demonstrated through regular collection and analysis of monitoring data.	Good	There is a strong commitment and effort made to assess results through monitoring against national and ecoregional goals, objectives and biodiversity targets. However, a simpler, more logical and integrated <u>presentation</u> of the various strategies, workplans and main monitoring indicators is required to tell the ecoregional story in a clearer way.
	2. Teams use these findings to strengthen their performance	Good	The implementing offices are keenly aware of gaps revealed by monitoring, but in many cases these relate to gaps in resources/funding.
	3. Learning is documented and shared for programme and organisational learning	Fair	There is little evidence that this is being done in a systematic way, either at Steering Committee, Executive Team or day-to-day levels. There is a specific need for enhanced exchange/sharing of information, expertise, know-how and experience between technical/field staff.

Disclaimer

I confirm that the above evaluation report is the result of an independent project evaluation process. The evaluation team has never had any relation to the project and its implementation. The presented results are the process of a free assessment of project documentation and the results found at place.

This evaluation was an external evaluation, aiming at giving an independent account of the programme and its achievements up-front of the planning for the next phase.

Berrynarbor, Ilfracombe, May 2014



Tim Jones
Independent Evaluation Expert

Contact person:

Uli Gräbener
Performance Controlling & Evaluation
WWF Deutschland
Reinhardtstr. 18
10117 Berlin