

A Force for Felines

Belvedere's Zara McDonald founded the Felidae Conservation Fund to help save the world's endangered big cats **BY BONNIE MONTE**



CHEETAH FUNDRAISER

The Felidae Conservation Fund will host a fundraiser in Belvedere on behalf of the Asiatic cheetah on April 12, 2007. For information visit felidaefund.org.

The 78-pound snow leopard, still languid from the effects of a tranquilizing dart, fixes her pale, luminous gaze directly on the camera some 400 meters distant. “I was using a very long lens,” Zara McDonald says, “but she knew *exactly* where I was.” The moment produced a haunting photograph. The big cat’s air of composure is particularly compelling in light of the events McDonald had just undergone.

McDonald and a team of researchers traveled to northwest Pakistan’s Chitral Gol National Park, where they managed to gently snare the snow leopard, immobilize her with a blow dart and put a GPS tracking collar on her. They weighed her, measured her, kept her warm and lubricated her eyes, which were temporarily unable to blink because of the effects of the tranquilizer. Then they watched until she recovered fully.

The collaring project—an international collaborative effort among multiple organizations—was spearheaded by Felidae Conservation Fund, the Belvedere nonprofit McDonald founded and directs. Its mission is to support scientific research and raise public awareness about the world's 37 species of wild cats. The Chitral Gol team hopes to collar five snow leopards over the next several months. The GPS devices will pinpoint the animals' movements, providing a wealth of information about the habits of these elusive creatures.

"The data will tell us where we need to preserve corridors, so the animals can move with ease through their habitat range," McDonald says. After a year's time, the battery in each collar will run low, triggering a release mechanism. A signal will remain active for another month or two, though, so researchers can retrieve the \$6,000 collars.

A Mill Valley native who spent most of her childhood in the United Kingdom, McDonald was an avid trail runner whose interest in big cats grew as she learned about encounters between runners and mountain lions. "It showed me how little awareness there was about carnivore species—especially those that evoke fear," she says. Felidae—the Latin name for the family of feline animals, from lions to house cats—now collaborates with the Wildlife Health Center at UC Davis on education and outreach programs to teach about mountain lions in San Diego schools. McDonald is working on instituting a similar program in Marin schools. "We need to get out the message that the mountain lion is integral to the ecosystem it exists in," she says.

McDonald's business background serves her in good stead as Felidae's executive director. After receiving an MBA from UC Berkeley, she cofounded a company that made GPS devices for hikers and runners. Subsequently, she was a partner in an equity fund that concentrated on sustainable investments. Feeling a pull to work with animals, she returned to school for a year

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of premed education as a precursor to veterinary studies. But after connecting with a scientist at a conference, she decided that funding research and conservation was the right path for her: "The work I'm doing is filling a void in my life that's been there a long time."

Having field experience under her belt enhances her outreach efforts. "It's more powerful if you can bring back a story firsthand," she says. That's why she accompanied Snow Leopard Conservation director Tom McCarthy and his team to Chitral Gol for two months, hiking six to eight hours a day over challenging terrain. "Seeing a snow leopard in the wild is absolutely life-changing," she says. "I felt completely safe sitting near that snow leopard as she was waking up. They're very gentle animals, not at all confrontational." She recounts incidents of villagers stoning animals that had attacked their livestock. "The snow leopards don't fight back," she says. "They just stand there and take it."

The snow leopard is on the endangered species list. Only about 3,000 to 7,000 exist, and they are threatened by poaching, loss of their natural prey in the wild and retribution from livestock owners. Conservation agencies are working with villagers, McDonald says, to help them build better corrals for their livestock and to develop alternative sources of income in the hopes of reducing wildlife poaching. "Talking with people makes an unbelievable difference in their participation and cooperation," she says.

McDonald hopes to expand the tracking project beyond Pakistan since the range of the leopards extends through 12 nations in Central and Southeast Asia. Such efforts involve time and finessing of details, she realizes, "but we'll make the links between the countries," she says. "We want to ensure that future generations have the luxury we take for granted—populations of wildlife."