

Speech at the presentation ceremony of the BBVA Foundation Biodiversity Conservation Awards

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Distinguished Guests,

One of the undue privileges of working with a great team and good collaborators is that they make you look good.

I stand before you this evening, basking in the reflected glory of a small but amazing group of people, who believe in thinking the unthinkable, and making it possible.

Nearly 10 years ago, these people decided to try and address the proverbial elephant in the room. While conservationists struggled to provide a voice to the voiceless animals and their habitats, government priorities were, understandably, focused on economic development. The kind of economic development, that has, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, come at the cost of biodiversity loss.

Snow leopard populations were declining. Their habitats, and the mountain people who lived there, were threatened by globalization and climate change. Yet, conservationists, governments, and the industry were hardly interacting with each other meaningfully. This was the simple problem, though it was a big one.

Any solution we came up with would have to be proportional to the size of the problem. So we decided to try and create an intergovernmental alliance for snow leopards, so that governments and the industry would start viewing snow leopard conservation with the seriousness we thought it deserved.

I have no shame in admitting that it took a huge amount of somewhat misplaced self-belief and collective-effort. We used all the connections we could muster with the powers that be. We met with politicians and civil servants in various

locations; within snow leopard range countries or at international conventions. We met in Moscow, we even met in Bangkok, far away from the land of snow leopards.

Finally, in 2013, we managed to bring together senior government officials from all 12 countries with snow leopards into one room in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Wonderful as it was, there were rather tense moments during the negotiations among countries, and there were disagreements.

That isn't surprising, considering that many of the countries these delegates were representing have had armed conflicts with each other; some of the governments don't talk to each other.

Yet, the country representatives showed leadership. Their spirit of concern for snow leopards and high mountain ecosystems prevailed over their disagreements. The so called Bishkek Declaration for snow leopards was finalized, and it was launched by none other than the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Thus was born the GSLEP Program on 23 October, 2013, headed by environment ministers of all snow leopard range countries.

Exactly a month ago, under the chairmanship of Her Excellency Ms. Dinara Kutmanova, Kyrgyzstan's Minister who we have the immense honour of having with us here, the program held its 7th steering committee meeting, that saw the participation of 7 ministers, 31 senior civil servants, and numerous delegates from international and national conservation organizations.

At this meeting, a review of the program showed that it has made considerable progress, by no means enough, but not insignificant either. The results include enhanced protection of 140,000 sq. km. of prime snow leopard habitat in 8 countries; more than 400 local mountain communities benefitting from livelihood and conservation programs in 12 countries; more than 1000 conservationists from 26 countries having been trained in various aspects of snow leopard conservation and monitoring; just to name a few.

During this meeting, a new program for sustainable economic development was

also launched; that aims to support sustainable, nature-based local businesses and enterprises.

All this could become possible thanks to the support of people like Her Excellency Ms Kutmanova and her beautiful country of Kyrgyzstan that hosts this program; the spirit of cooperation amongst all the 12 countries; and the generosity of our funding partners including UNEP, UNDP, GEF, WWF, and the Whitley Fund for Nature.

Most significantly, this progress has relied on the passion and hard work of a small but incredible team making the impossible possible: Secretariat staff headed by Dr. Koustubh Sharma and Chyngyz Kochorov who are there with us, and those who aren't, including Mr. Keshav Varma, Dr. Ranjini Murali, and others. You all are making a difference, and you make me look good!

Finally, I am immensely grateful to the BBVA foundation for the honour. This program shows the magic of snow leopards and nature. It shows how nations can set aside their differences and come together to work for nature and wildlife, and for a better planet. On behalf of all 12 countries; all our partners; the entire team at SLT, and on behalf of the snow leopards of the world, BBVA Foundation, a huge thank you.