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THE SNOW LEOPARD: ELUSIVE AND ENDANGERED

In the remote Himalayan region of Ladakh lives an elusive creature that appears in both Buddhist and shamanistic legends. This animal is the snow leopard, which keeps to the high mountains of a range that includes Tibet, Nepal and India, as well as the more remote parts of Afghanistan, China, Mongolia and the former Soviet Union. There are at most 7,000 snow leopards alive today, but scientists say their number may be down to only 4,000.

Snow leopards are nowhere common. Scientists usually report only five or six sightings in the course of a decade of field work. Because of the pale, ghostly color of the animal's fur, those who are lucky enough to encounter a snow leopard may not even notice one until it moves. Joseph L. Fox, a wildlife biologist coordinating a snow leopard research project with Earthwatch environmental research institute, says he's seen snow leopards only four times, including a memorable three-day encounter with a cat that was slowly devouring a captured goat. "This incident really impressed on us both the lack of danger that the snow leopard presents to humans, and how easy it can be to kill a leopard when it stays on a kill for several days" he says.

Darla Hillard, conservation education director for the International Snow Leopard Trust, says that "the remoteness and difficulty of access to the snow leopard's range are a major challenge for everyone studying the cats, compounded in some cases by international hostilities."

Since the snow leopard preys on wild ungulates such as the blue sheep, Great Tibetan sheep and Asiatic ibex, as well as small animals like the mouse hare, the cat is vulnerable when such species are threatened. Another threat is poaching for leopard skin and bones, which are often used in traditional Chinese medicine when tiger parts aren't available. In

the former Soviet republics between 1993 and 1994, half of the wild leopard population was poached for its valuable pelts. Snow leopards are also hunted because of their predation on livestock.

In Ladakh, where tourism and rapid development have taken their toll on the environment, efforts are underway to assess the threats to the snow leopard's habitat. In the newly-formed Hemis National Park, scientists and volunteers are observing the habits of snow leopard prey and monitoring the effects of tourism and domestic livestock grazing. Researchers hope to create the foundation for a successful snow leopard conservation program in Ladakh, thus insuring the survival of this other-worldly cat--shy snow-spirit of the highest lands on Earth. CONTACT: Earthwatch Institute, 680 Mount Auburn Street, Watertown, MA 02272-9104/(800)776-0188; International Snow Leopard Trust, 4649 Sunnyside Avenue North, Suite 325, Seattle, WA 98103/(206)6322421.

PHOTO (COLOR): Perhaps as few as 4,000 snow leopards still roam anywhere on earth. Poaching and tourism-associated development could further diminish their numbers.

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By Martha Bright Anandakrishnan

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