

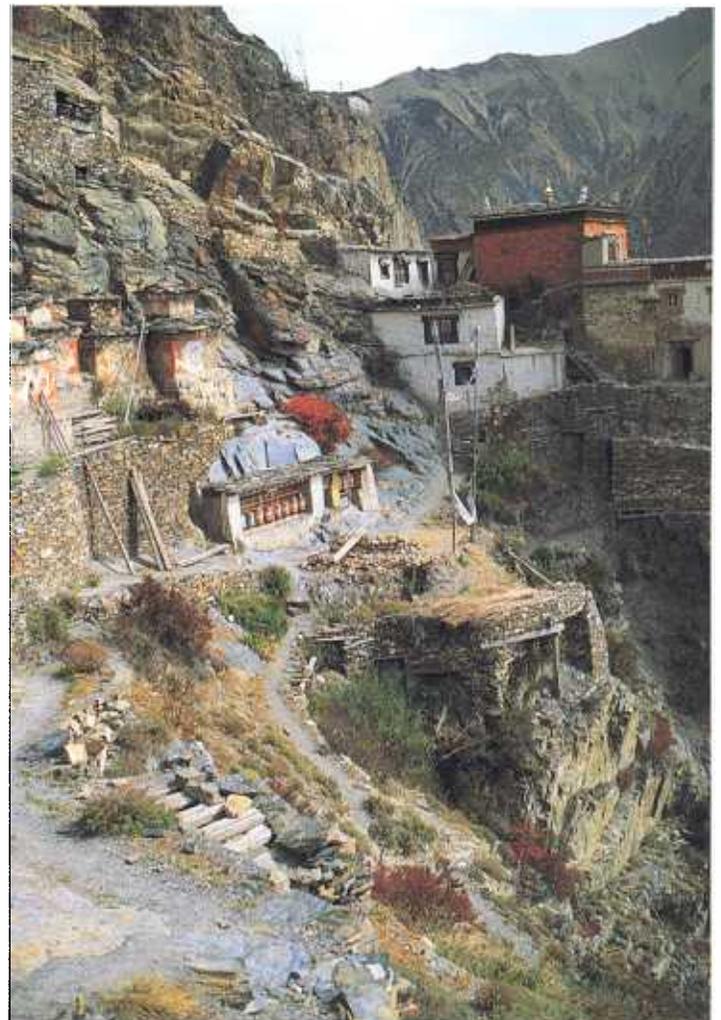


Preserving the Snow Leopard and its Habitat

Rodney Jackson has successfully radio-tracked one of the rarest and most elusive creatures in the world – the Himalayan snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*). By 1980, the animals were seriously at risk of extinction, due to degradation of their habitat, human population growth and poaching for their beautiful fur. Jackson, now acknowledged as the world authority on snow leopards, has developed a number of conservation activities related to the leopards and their habitat, and his work is focusing increasingly on the delicate interaction between people and wildlife.

British wildlife ecologist Rodney Jackson won a 1981 Rolex Award for his work on one of the world's most endangered species, the Himalayan snow leopard. When he began his research in the 1970s, there was little evidence that the species could be found in Nepal's three national parks, and several early expeditions to track snow leopards had proved unsuccessful. South African-born Jackson, who is today a U.S. citizen, realised that a strategy for preserving these animals required a thorough understanding of their movements, range, food habits, hunting behaviour and social organisation.

Jackson, who holds a masters degree in zoology from the University of California at Berkeley and who is about to complete a doctorate at the University of London, was the first to radio-collar and study this elusive species successfully. "I was aware from personal experience that wild snow leopards were very difficult to study and radio-telemetry was the only feasible approach," he explains. His expedition is often cited by biologists as a model for such field studies, because it illustrates how the various logistical, physical and political obstacles can be overcome with careful planning and perseverance.



Although Jackson reports that the snow leopard is currently out of danger of extinction in Nepal and Bhutan, his commitment to the magnificent cat and to other wildlife has remained strong. His efforts have spawned a number of conservation activities, including his recent appointment as Director of Conservation for the Inter-

national Snow Leopard Trust, which holds an International Snow Leopard Symposium every three years.

In his new capacity of Director of Conservation, Jackson plans to begin a programme in Mongolia in late 1996 in which local shepherds will be offered incentives to protect wildlife and will be advised on how to reduce ►



The Mount Everest Conservation Programme is a huge area which encompasses several national parks in Tibet and Nepal and includes five of the world's highest peaks. In addition to a pristine ecosystem and exceptional wildlife, the area houses people whose way of life has remained unchanged for centuries.



snow leopard predation through better guarding of their flocks. Jackson is also in charge of the Snow Leopard Information Management System (SLIMS), a programme also under the aegis of the Trust. SLIMS is a relatively simple technique for detecting snow leopards in the wild and is currently being implemented on a pilot basis in Mongolia and Pakistan. Given basic training, anyone can apply this method and the information obtained will be used to develop a computerised Geographical Information System (GIS) map featuring such parameters as habitat range, prey distribution and the protected areas where the cat can be found.

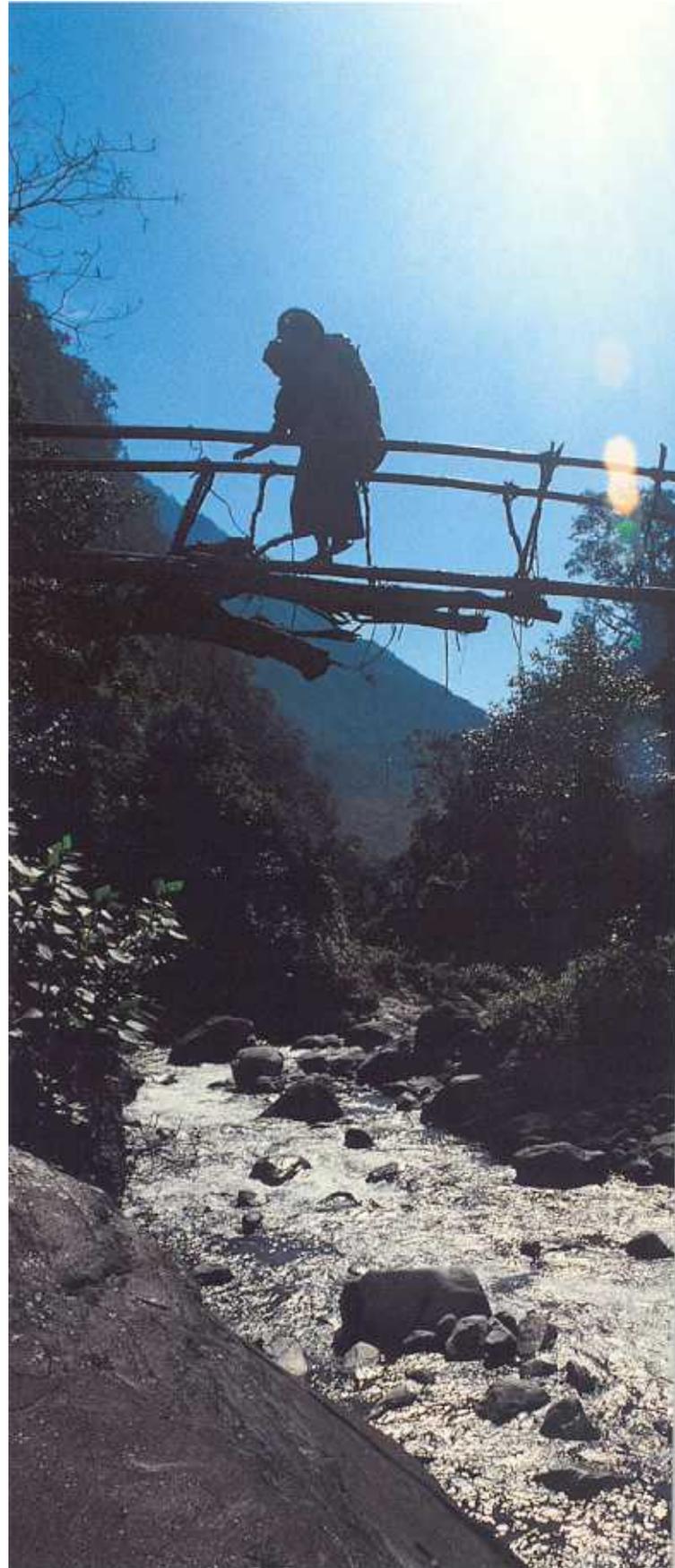
The range occupied by snow leopards, whose total population is estimated at between 4,500 and 7,000, extends over 3 million square kilometres,

from Afghanistan to China and from Siberia to northern India. The animals are often found in remote and inaccessible areas that are sparsely populated by human beings. Until Jackson established the SLIMS training workshops, few people even knew how to distinguish a snow leopard from other large, wild cats.

In addition to this elementary method for detecting the presence of snow leopards, Jackson is also using highly sophisticated satellite imaging to explore habitat range in Central Asia.

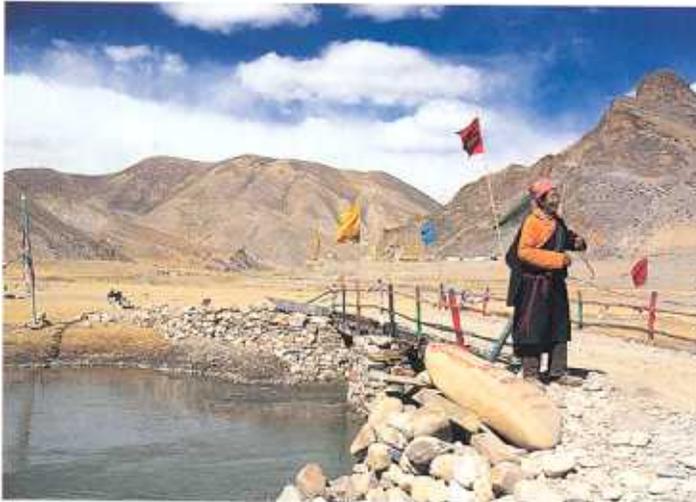
People and Wildlife

More recently, however, Jackson's work has focused increasingly on "the interactions of people and wildlife, including indigenous cultures, traditional livelihoods and proven avenues of participatory resource mana-





Snow leopards, which were once hunted almost into extinction, currently number about 7,000 in the wild. Their range – almost 3 million km² – includes many former Soviet republics.



gement,” he reports. As a senior science consultant at the U.S.-based Woodlands Mountain Institute, where another former Rolex Laureate, Johan Reinhard, is also a fellow, Jackson has been actively involved in establishing the Mount Everest Conservation Programme at the foot of the Himalayas.

No other conservation project can boast of having five of the world’s highest mountain peaks, including Mount Everest, within its area, with altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 8,000 metres. It is also one of the earth’s last pristine ecosystems and contains threatened tropical forestry. Its arid plateaux, precipitous cliffs and wetlands sustain rare birds, plants and wildlife species such as snow leopards, black-necked cranes, musk deer and red pandas.

The programme includes the

Qomolangma Nature Preserve in Tibet, and the newer Makalu-Barun Conservation Project (MBCP), established in 1988 and opened in 1992, in Nepal. These reserves link up with two existing national parks in Nepal, Sagarmatha and Langtang, to form an enormous conservation area extending over 37,000 square kilometres, approximately the size of Switzerland.

These parks harbour a vast array of animal, plant and tree species; but nestled in the depths of their lush valleys are also dense human populations, numbering about 100,000 people. Although culturally rich, these indigenous people are economically poor and their life styles, which have remained unchanged for centuries, have only recently been introduced to modernisation.

Unfortunately, increasing expo-

sure to the modern world is bringing changes in the form of vast infrastructure projects to the Makalu-Barun Park. These could have a negative impact on the wildlife and cultural sites, as well as on the local inhabitants. Preventive measures were designed and are currently being implemented to preserve the environment and turn the potentially adverse consequences of these changes into economic opportunities for the people.

Jackson reports that the World Bank recently cancelled plans to build a hydro-electric dam on the Arun River in the Makalu-Barun Park because of widespread environmental concern and public opposition. “This is very good news,” he says.

He adds: “We have just held a very successful training workshop in the Qomolangma Nature Preserve on alleviating people wildlife conflicts and promoting alternative and sustainable means of livelihood – in this case, handicrafts, weaving, ecotourism and pony rentals.”

These are but a few of Jackson’s latest activities and accomplishments. The richness of his work is clear evidence of his talent and inexhaustible spirit of enterprise, which should help him continue to push forward the limits of conservation. 🏆