Rare cat has back problems

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An aging Snow leopard that has been the San Antonio Zoo's most prolific father has a back problem and is no longer able to breed.

"Frosty" has sired at least 20 offspring but now has trouble walking and seems to be in considerable pain.

Dr. Kenneth Fletcher, the zoo's veterinarian, wasn't sure what the problem was until the animal was tested at Medical Center Hospital.

"That's right. The zoo health center doesn't have the sophisticated equipment needed to study the spinal cord and nerve roots."

So the leopard was anesthetized, put in a box and taken to the hospital. Dr. Donald Chakares, head of neuroradiology, did the test on the animal like he does on people.

He didn't let out a single meow and was "more cooperative than most of our human patients," the physician said.

"Of course, I've never treated a cat before, but it looks to me like he has got degenerative disc disease just like old people have. If he were human, I'd say he'll need surgery," he said.

That's exactly what Fletcher plans on next month. Surgery to help relieve the back problem will be done at the zoo, but the vet will be assisted by a local physician who does back surgery on people.

Frosty, you see, is pretty special because he's "the best breeder" of the snow leopards at the zoo, according to Russell Smith, general curator.

Snow leopards are rare and may well become extinct within the next couple of decades, Smith explained.

And that's the main reason Frosty is so important. He lived in the wild until he was trapped in the Soviet Union and was shipped to the zoo here in 1971. Since

The animal is 15 years old, etc. for a leopard, but there are now cubs at the zoo that Frosty sired.

Of course, he's out of commission now, while awaiting surgery, penned up at the zoo health center. "He can walk, but he'd prefer a wheelchair because it's obviously very uncomfortable," Smith said.

"What will he do with his life?"

"Will he remain the last male in the opposite sex?"

At this point, Fletcher doesn't know. "It just depends on how damage has been done," he said.

He added that even if Frosty were to perform, his sperm can be collected and then used to impregnate a female.

"After all, he's very valuable. We need to transmit his genetic material," Fletcher said.

In the meantime, the cubs will be sent to the hospital for services rendered by the leopard.

"FROSTY." The Snow Leopard Bares His Fangs for the Photographer... the prolific cat is the zoo's 'best breeder' but has back problems