

INDIA

The snow leopard

Barbara Keen on the scarcity value of illicit furs

The purpose of the scheme is to produce goods for export in order to earn foreign exchange to pay Brazil's \$90 billion foreign debt. But even the financial basis of the scheme is questionable. At least a third of Brazil's debt has been run up by public companies borrowing to finance spectacular projects such as the costly and controversial nuclear programme. The Carajas programme will dwarf anything so far attempted in Brazil, in terms of cost and risk.

The backbone of the programme is the iron ore mine. The European Community is financing one third of the \$1.8 billion cost. According to community official Robert Verruc, the investment is 'tightly tied to the interests of the European steel industry. Companies in France, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Luxembourg have signed long-term contracts with CVRD for secure deliveries of iron ore supplies at favourable prices'. In fact CVRD has already sold 27 of the 35 million tons of high-grade ore for what a Brazilian opposition politician called 'banana prices'. The mine is now projected by some economists to run at a loss for ten years or more, and will need more expensive foreign loans to keep going.

In order to obtain international finance for the iron ore and bauxite projects, Brazil agreed to give foreign investors big tax concessions, generous import quotas, electricity at an average 30 per cent discount, and to provide modern infrastructure, including the railway and deep water port. These inducements, along with extremely lax pollution controls and cheap labour have attracted Japanese, European and American investors. One such is an aluminium refinery and smelter that will process bauxite from a Canadian mine and from one owned by Rio Tinto-Zinc; it will consume, at a discount, up to five per cent of Brazil's electricity supply by the end of the century. Unlike the foreign multinationals, however, Brazilian consumers will pay the full price for electricity.

Proponents of Tucurui (and the other eight large and 19 smaller dams built to exploit the immense water flow of the Amazon Basin's rivers) argue that hydroelectricity will reduce Brazil's annual \$9 billion oil import bill. Tucurui alone could provide electricity equivalent to 400,000 barrels a day, a notional savings on oil of \$12 million a day. But Brazil already has nearly a 25 per cent surplus of generating capacity. Paying interest on the borrowing to build these huge dams (\$7.5 billion for Tucurui alone) will offset much of the projected savings. In any case, most of Tucurui's production will not go to replace electricity produced by imported oil for the heavily-populated south. It will be largely supplying, at a discount, new industrial customers in the north.

Environmentalists, human rights groups and development agencies have urged the European Community to suspend all loan payments to Brazil pending detailed studies of the effects of the Grande Carajas programme on local people and on the ecology and economy of the Amazon. The Commission, however, insists that: 'the concern expressed in this connection is not justified... the developer has laid particular emphasis on environmental protection and the human implications of the project'. □

Kashmir

THE RED DATA Book lists and grades the endangered animals of the world. Among the Asian species, the snow leopard is listed as 'severely endangered'.

Sightings of this handsome and elusive cat are extremely rare in its native Himalayas. But they are easy enough to find in Srinagar, capital of Kashmir. Unfortunately, they are all on coat-hangers.

Yet in India the snow leopard — and about 60 other species — are supposed to have total protection. State and national legislation prohibits the hunting or selling of 'Schedule A' animals. Every stage of the process is apparently covered — you may not hunt or trap the snow leopard, you may not sell the pelt or goods made from it, you may not take such products out of the country, and international agreements prevent the import of endangered animal products into many countries.

The visitor is left in no doubt about the official line. There are two large notices at the Srinagar Tourist Reception Centre warning of the perils of purchasing protected animals products — arrest, fines, confiscation, even imprisonment.

Posing as a prospective buyer, I stroked the thick cream and grey coats. 'Yes, they are beautiful,' I said to the furrier, 'but surely I'd be stopped at the airport by an eagle-eyed customs man?'

'Oh madam, no one will trouble you at the airport.'

'But the notice at Tourist Reception?'

'I am giving you a document.'

'You can't give a document for a prohibited export!'

'Oh yes,' he said calmly, flicking open a large book and showing all the receipts given to other buyers. 'Besides, you are a foreign tourist, you can export personal goods.'

'Won't the customs people confiscate it? Great mirth throughout the shop.'

'The customs men don't confiscate anything, madam, but if you are worried, I will do one thing, I will post the coat to you.'

'But surely the postal authorities... ' More gales of laughter. Then a sheaf of correspondence was produced — thanks for goods received and further orders. The letters were from all over the world, ordering a range of furs, though the snow leopard is a runaway best seller with Germans and Japanese, according to several furriers. The trade in endangered skins was obviously healthy in Kashmir, in spite of an overall decline in their fur trade.

and £3,500. There are many dodges. One furrier had a rack of coats made from various 'Schedule A' animals — snow leopard, clouded leopard, lynx, even a tiger coat, looking like an up-market camouflage jacket, which I suppose it is, in its natural state.

The furrier insisted that he had had the coats since the '60s, well before the current protective legislation was passed. Yet they seemed very shiny and new. He had been trying to persuade the authorities to compensate him for his theoretically unsaleable stock, but, in the meantime, he would be delighted to sell one or two from the banned rack, and for me to drum up a bit of mail-order business when I got home.

You might have thought that a state government serious about stopping the trade in endangered skins would have taken existing stock from local traders at the time the legislation was passed, so there could be no question of 'old stock' on the racks almost ten years later.

Pursuing my investigations, I went down-market to a tatty little shop with a heap of small spotted skins on the floor. I was assured in hushed tones that they were baby snow leopard. They weren't, but it must have seemed worth a try to jump on the bandwagon.

Earlier in the day, in a posh shop along the boulevard, I had seen a dozen adult pelts ready for making up, a rack of exotic coats, made mainly from protected animals, waiting for lining and adjusting to the buyer's specifications, and two more, lined and finished, to be collected by their new Japanese owners.

The factors in the snow leopard trade fit together with a neat and terrible finality. Total protection on the books, less than rigorously enforced, means high prices for everyone in the chain — hunter, middleman and furrier: for the foreign buyer, an envy-creating bargain to be flaunted or sold at great profit. But the real price is being paid by the snow leopard, the last of whom may soon be found on a coat-hanger in Srinagar. □



The snow leopard: a 'severely endangered' species of cat

A SNOW LEOPARD coat costs between £2,000