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3. Snow Leopards Could Save Mountain Biodiversity

By Ramyata Limbu

KATHMANDU, Jul 22 (IPS) - The woman in the picture is attired in a luxurious fur coat and hat. The distinctly spotted pelt is that of a snow leopard's - that elusive and endangered species found in the mountains of central and south Asia.

"A coat like that would probably cost 60,000-80,000 dollars in a big shop," said Dr Rodney Jackson as he recently made a presentation on the status of his favorite subject.

Conservation Director of the International Snow Leopard Trust, Dr Jackson, however, feels there is greater cause for concern.

"Fortunately, changing norms of the fashion world and increasing consumer awareness has fewer people wearing snow leopard pelts.

"The demand for fur may have gone down but the demand for bones and body parts as marketable items for use in traditional Chinese medicine has gone up," said Dr Jackson.

Further, conflict with humans is rapidly becoming the single most important issue, he said.

Conservationists fear that local people, whose lives depend heavily upon animal husbandry, often see no advantage in co-existing with snow leopards and may be reluctant to support conservation of this mountain species.

Trust reports state that herders in Nepal have been known to exchange bones for domestic stock from Tibet.

"I believe bones are going north to Tibet, where herdsmen are selling them to mainlanders in Shanghai and Beijing," says the Seattle-based Trust's conservation director. "Because tiger bones are tough to get, snow leopard bones have become a substitute. It's a different kind of threat."

Listed as an endangered species and protected by the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an estimated 4,500-7,500 snow leopards are distributed through the mountain ranges of China, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Mongolia.

Erosion of traditional knowledge, reduced herder vigilance, increased livestock numbers, and other animal husbandry changes are emerging as a grave threat to the endangered cat.

According to Trust reports, the number of domestic stock damage complaints appear on the increase, possibly due to a widespread decline in prey numbers.

Stock losses vary widely from area to area, from 18 percent of the livestock holding in India's Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary over a 18 month period to 2.6 percent of the stockholding in Nepal's Annapurna area, and as low as 0.1 percent in most areas.

The loss in the Annapurna area in west Nepal represents as much as 25 percent of the average household's per capita income. In a worst case scenario, it is not unknown for a single family to lose as many as 50-100 sheep or goats in a single event - when a cat enters a poorly made livestock pen at night and in confusion kills many animals.

Surveys in Nepal, India and Mongolia further indicate that horses are particularly vulnerable to the predator. "Unlike wild animals, horses grazing in high pastures are slow to react to attacks. Owing to their high economic value this intensifies the anger toward predators and feeling of retribution among the affected herders," says Siddhartha Bajracharya, director of Annapurna Conservation Area Project.

Conservationists see an urgent need to continue long term research, which should focus on management issues like livestock depredation and rangeland competition between domestic stock and wild ungulates.

Dr Jackson recently spent more than a month in northwest Nepal's remote Shey Phoksundo National Park in Dolpo, where he trained mountain park staff to carry out surveys on the status of the snow leopard - a 'flagship' or 'indicator' species for promoting mountain bio diversity conservation across the 12 Asian countries in which it ranges.

In addition to Pakistan, China, Mongolia and Bhutan, Nepal is the fifth country in which the Trust is sponsoring a training on the information management system of the snow leopard.

After studying the tracks, faeces, and scrape marks of the animal in Upper Dolpo's Langu Valley, the team comprising rangers and scouts from mountain parks and protected across Nepal, estimated roughly 100 snow leopards in Shey Phoksundo.

Potential snow leopard habitat in Nepal may total as much as 30,000 sq kms. The animals are mostly found along the northern border with Tibet, with the largest populations in Dolpo, Mugu, Manang and Myagdi districts.

While Nepal's snow leopard population has been roughly estimated at

300-500, Shey Phoksundo National Park, spread over 3,555 sq kms, would need at least several hundred snow leopards to ensure a viable population.

Today 3,200 people live in the park and 20,000 on its periphery which ensures the ground for conflict between people and wildlife.

"The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation has initiated a buffer zone programme in the area," says DNPWC Director-General Dr T.M. Maskey. "The programme aims to develop income-earning programmes for local people and skill- training for local communities."

A critical issue which the Department may have to address is the question of individual compensation to those who have lost livestock, says Dr Maskey.

Park staff are aware of challenges that they face. Apart from lack of trained staff, the rugged terrain hampers the status or distribution surveys as well as surveillance patrols. Then there are the herdsmen to deal with.

"I don't think poaching is that big a problem since the people in the area practice Tibetan Bon Po culture which forbids killing," says Birendra Kandel survey team member and a ranger in Shey Phoksundo National Park. "But it's natural for locals to retaliate when their livelihood is threatened."