

Outcry over Mongolian bounty on snow leopards

by SHYAM BHATIA

SAFARI hunters are being offered a chance to shoot snow leopards, one of the world's rarest and most beautiful species of wild cat.

The safaris are to be operated in Mongolia by an American company, Kleinberger Brothers of Dallas. Mr Bert Kleinberger said he expected to attract world-wide interest when the first safari sets off in April. His company is charging \$5,200 (£3,500) excluding air fares, for the safari, with the Mongolian Government collecting a further \$11,200 (£7,500) trophy fee for each leopard killed.

The Mongolian Government, which is behind the offer, has emphasised the leopards must be established livestock predators that would be regarded as a nuisance by local farmers in the wide open spaces of the Gobi steppes. A hunting quota of five animals per year has been set.

The decision has horrified animal lovers, who fear the snow leopard is on the verge of extinction. Millionaire zoo owner John Aspinall, who has bred snow leopards in captivity in

his zoo in Kent, said: 'This is a terrible setback, a very unwise move.'

He described snow leopards as possessing 'a very affectionate nature' with qualities not found in other wild animals. 'They bond in pairs for life and if you shoot one, the surviving partner will probably never mate again.'

Snow leopards are also kept at Marwell Zoo in Hampshire. 'Pavan, Pavel and Vanda are the most popular feline after the tiger,' said the curator, Mr Peter Birch.

'I regret any pressure on them and am shocked to hear the news of the safaris. Snow leopards have started to disappear in some parts of their range where they are being hunted. We don't know how many are left in a wild state.'

Mr David Mallon a Manchester zoologist who has tracked snow leopards in Mongolia, estimates the animal's population there at between 500 and 900. His estimates contradict those of Polish and Mongolian wild life specialists who say there are between 2,000 and 4,000.

The higher estimates have encouraged some wild life specialists to defend the killing of snow leopards, provided it is well controlled.

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