

## Dead snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) at Yabuk, Dongkung (5500M) in North Sikkim

### Full Text:

Snow leopard *Uncia uncia* is protected in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 as amended upto 1998. There are almost no recent sight records of this rare big cat from Sikkim, the last being a cub from Sebu La region in Lashar valley, north Sikkim. The male cub 'Shebu' survived for less than a year in captivity in Gangtok in 1993-1994. There has been no study so far on its present status in Sikkim.

On 18 November, 1998, a Tibetan grazier or 'Dokpa' was attracted by a hovering raven while grazing his yaks at Yabuk (c. 5500m), a rocky place about two km above Dongkung at the foot of Chhomo peak on the Chho Lhamo Plateau. Upon investigating, he saw what he thought was a sleeping, probably sick snow leopard in the grass at the base of some large boulders. Sensing something was wrong, he drove away the raven and went closer. He found it was an adult male snow leopard dead in sleeping posture. The spot was very isolated and intending to return the next day to collect the specimen to bring down to me in Gangtok, he went back to his camp.

Unfortunately the next day, feral dogs had discovered the carcass. Most of the softer portions, the internal organs and the ribs had been eaten away. The grazier collected the remains. Almost in the same sleeping posture, most of the carcass except the head and shoulders dried naturally in the cold of this desert area. Six months later on 16 May 1999, he brought the remains down to Gangtok in a highly decomposed state and deposited them in the Wildlife Circle of the Department of Forests, Environment & Wildlife. The heat accelerated putrefaction and we tried to save the specimen as much as possible by skinning. On examining the jaws of the snow leopard we saw that the upper left canine was missing, as was one incisor in the upper jaw. The other teeth were also worn out and yellow. The claws were also blunt. The front pad in the pug measured 8.5 cm and the hind, 8 cm. The tail measured 92 cm and had a diameter of c. 13 cm. The bones were buried in the ground to remove the tissue. They have not yet been measured.

The 'Dokpa' grazier had two previous sightings of snow leopard in this area. On 27 July 1998 it was sighted at Dongkung. It was last seen alive at Yabuk on 10 September 1998. He also recorded sightings of upto 30 blue sheep *Pseudois nayaur* in this area. Around 1100 yak and 2000 sheep belonging to 18 'Dokpa' families also use the area

Feral dogs have long infested the entire area where this animal was found. These dogs were brought to the Tibetan plateau as pups from lower altitudes by the army jawans for company. On finishing their stint in this 'difficult area' all the dogs are abandoned. These have since bred with the local Tibetan mastiff and multiplied by feeding off the kitchen wastes of the army camps. Today these feral dogs roam in packs on the plateau, living off marmots, woolly hare, Tibetan gazelle, blue sheep, young nayan and kiang as also domestic, sheep, goats and young yak, including those animals, which have been lamed by landmines. Usually nothing is done to control their number. Needless to say the pure breed of Tibetan mastiff which is a master herder, also seems to have been irretrievably lost. It is also difficult to quantify the feral dog population as the entire area though under jurisdiction of the Department of F. E. & WL is under defence control where civilian activities are severely and actively restricted.

All wildlife as well as domestic livestock on the Tibetan plateau of Sikkim is under severe stress due to the various defence priorities. This area known as the Chho Lhamo plateau is perhaps the only one in the entire eastern and central Himalayas to have breeding endangered species such as the southern kiang *Equus kiang polyodon*, lynx *Lynx lynx* and blacknecked crane *Grus nigricollis*, in addition to snow leopard all listed in Schedule I of the Act. The richness of the region, has prompted the State Wildlife Advisory Board to propose it as a cold desert protected area.

It is presumed that the snow leopard may not have died a natural death after all. Perhaps it was the stress of competition with feral dogs and subsequent lack of prey that caused it to starve to death.

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[Gangtok: Date of arrival: 22 September 1993

Date of death: 25 August 1994 (rescued from Sebu RF by Anu Lachenpa]