

# FIELD REPORT FROM THE HIMALAYAN SNOW LEOPARD PROJECT

by Darla Hillard

## Survey In Hongu Valley

After participating in the Fifth International

Snow Leopard Symposium in Srinagar.

October, 1986. Rodney Jackson and Gary Ahlborn continued on to Nepal, where they

mounted two expeditions back-to-back in the Kingdom's eastern Himalaya. These expeditions would test the snow leopard habitat suitability model and survey technique they had developed during the Snow Leopard Project's Langu Valley radio-tracking study in west Nepal.

The first survey was undertaken in the uninhabited Hongu Valley southeast of Mt. Everest (Sagarmatha), in association with the newly formed Heart of the Himalayas Conservation Programme. (See conclusion of this report for details on the Programme.)

The upper Hongu Valley was judged to be prime habitat for snow leopards, uninhabited and similar in some ways to the Langu. Situated in the east and more exposed to the monsoon rains and the winter snows, it would be wetter than the Langu, but its remote and rugged alpine terrain made it an ideal candidate for comparison. Trekking groups regularly reported seeing large cat tracks along the trail. There was no practical way to walk in or out in the available time, so Rod and Gary were dropped by helicopter, along with supplies, onto a grassy meadow at 14,000 feet in the upper Hongu Valley. They would not see another soul for three weeks.

The Hongu in fall would appeal to anyone who loves the high mountains and their stark, golden, sweeping beauty. But winter had already arrived, and mists often obscured the peaks and valleys. There was no wood with which to build a fire, and they cooked on small kerosene stoves. They were in their sleeping bags by dark every night. Two groups of trekkers were scheduled to come through, but the weather was so foul and the snow on the passes so deep that both groups cancelled their trips.

Of snow leopard, they found not a sign in all the Hongu's alpine wilderness. Nor did they find a single pellet or track of Himalayan tahr that the snow leopard might prey upon. Though there are no villages in the valley, people graze domestic sheep on the Hongu's high pastures. For a few months in summer and early fall, the land is so scoured that no wild hoofed animal could possibly co-exist year round. Add to that the ever-alert human hunter and you can be certain: where there is no large wild prey, there will be no snow leopards.

## Survey In Khumbu Area

For the second survey, the Khumbu area of Sagarmatha National Park represented hypothetically poor snow leopard habitat due to relatively dense permanent human habitations and a long history of overgrazing by livestock. There had been no reported sightings of snow leopards in the park for ten years or more. Here was an opportunity to investigate park management in areas where both people and wildlife must compete for the same resources.

The Khumbu survey was done in a very different style from the Hongu one. SoluKhumbu is the homeland of the Sherpas, the famous mountaineering guides, and it is Nepal's most popular area for tourist trekking. Thanks to support provided by the International Trust for Nature Conservation, the team got the royal treatment, with a whole staff of porters, cooks, and camp attendants to

care for their every need. At first, Rod and Gary were embarrassed by such luxury, never even having to pitch their own tent. But their embarrassment did not last. For once, neither of them had to waste a minute over the details of expedition life and it made their work considerably easier.

It was even colder in Khumbu than it had been in the Hongu. Their route kept the expedition mostly at altitudes between 15,000 and 17,000 feet. One of the Sagarmatha National Park rules is that no wood is to be burned by visitors. All cooking must be done with kerosene, and trekking and mountaineering groups must

prove that they are self-sufficient in fuel before

being allowed into the park. Reforestation programs are in effect in several places throughout Nepal, but the Everest area's high altitude makes regeneration a slow and difficult process.

Rod and Gary were surprised by what they found: evidence that at least one cat had visited the Gokyo Valley within the past few months. Furthermore, despite heavy grazing by yaks, during the summer the valley supported a good population of Himalayan tahr. Yaks grazed side by side with wild musk deer near the village of Phortse at the mouth of the Dudh Kosi. Clearly, protection from hunting, imposed when the park was designated, had enabled both these animals to reestablish

themselves in close proximity to man. Flocks of snowcocks and snow partridges were commonly encountered in the high glacial basins, in sharp contrast to the few seen in the Hongu. More than 200 blood pheasants foraging

on the hill near Thyangboche Monastery provided further evidence of the role that protection from hunting can play in the survival of tenacious mountain-dwelling species, even when their habitat is under heavy pressure from man. Apparently, protection measures in Sagarmatha National Park are proving successful.

As the Hongu Valley demonstrates,

geographical isolation does not always help a shy predator like the snow leopard: the key to the species' future is firmly in the hands of man. On the bright side for the Hongu, we have learned that the sheep grazing is carried on by a lease arrangement between villagers of the lower Hongu and people living to the south. Very few individuals are involved, and the grazing could be curtailed or reduced relatively simply by offering reasonable monetary compensation. With suitable protection, there

is every reason to believe that the Himalayan tahr found in the forests of the lower Hongu would eventually expand upwards into the rugged upper valley to feed upon the alpine grasses. With the return of the tahr, a reliable food supply, the return of the snow leopards may not be far behind.

### **Hope for the Snow Leopard**

It is a fact that the snow leopard is nearly as much a victim of international boundaries and politics as it is a victim of the hunter's bullet or poisoned spear. Much of the cat's range is located in border *zones* where mutual mistrust and conflict inhibit efforts to reverse environmental trends that will, if allowed to continue, have a much farther-reaching effect than just the extinction of the snow leopard. The mountains themselves are at critical risk; the ecological balance of the Himalaya has been so altered by man that the children who play in the wheat fields today may be the last to grow up to till the land, for the soil will soon be gone and the plow's wooden blade will turn nothing but stone.

There is new hope that the snow leopard, as a striking symbol of the world's loftiest highlands, can help transcend political and social barriers to rehabilitation. An ambitious conservation plan was passed in Srinagar by Symposium delegates from Europe, Asia, and North America, addressing the issue of a global strategy for survival of the snow leopard and its habitat. Priorities were placed in increasing our understanding of the snow leopard's ecology, as a keystone species, and on identifying viable montane habitat in need of protection.

But it is one thing to make resolutions, another thing to put a plan into action. More and more,

it is apparent that international cooperation is a must--the key element in any global strategy--and that a consortium approach can be a powerful force in effecting change.

Such an alliance exists in the recently formed Heart of the Himalayas Conservation Programme, a group that brings a bold new vitality to the idea of international cooperation. Here we have a multi-disciplinary, multi-national effort, coordinated by the Woodlands Mountain Institute of West Virginia, working together to bring a low-cost people-inclusive solution to the urgent problems of ecological conservation in the Everest area. The purpose of the Nepalese/Chinese/American coalition is to form a first-of-its-kind international park in Asia, preserving some two million acres in the Mt. Everest region, overlapping the Nepal-Tibet border. For the Nepalese portion, Sagarmatha National Park will be expanded to include the

Hongu and Makalu Valleys. China is considering a 2,000 square mile area of Tibet, including the Karma Valley. An enormous diversity of high-altitude habitats, from the wet southern slopes of the Himalaya to the desert plains of the Tibetan Plateau, will be included, affording protection for a wide range of native plants and animals as well as the livelihoods and cultures of the human residents. Substantial amounts of existing or potential habitat for snow leopard and their prey are encompassed in this precedent-setting project.

It is old news that when people pull together, funds go farther; when western aid-givers, too, pool their knowledge and experience the way is opened for greater cumulative progress. To see the concept in action is infinitely promising.

Information from such a wide variety of sources could be woven into a master high mountain restoration strategy appropriate to all of Central Asia. For instance, using the snow leopard and its prey as indicator species, a standardized high-altitude wildlife survey

technique would enable biologists over all of Central Asia to systematically assess large areas of mountain habitat, at the same time expanding knowledge of the snow leopard and its worldwide status. Methods already under trial for rehabilitation of deteriorating lands and for including local human involvement in

preservation schemes could be adjusted all across the Himalaya. One obvious advantage to inter-agency partnership is the elimination of overlap and costly duplication of effort. Another might be the public relations potential in an active demonstration of peaceful and constructive coexistence between traditional political rivals.

There is everything to be gained by moving decisively and collectively from pen and paper to boots and binoculars. Without such concerted endeavors, the objectives of the conservation plan endorsed at the Snow Leopard Symposium will be pointless. Now we have the momentum. Working together, we can make the quantum leaps necessary to save the Himalayas.

*Darla Hillard, a member of the Snow Leopard Project team, is at work on a behind-the-scenes account of the four-year Langu Valley study. In December, 1986, she joined Rod and Gary during the survey of the Sagarmatha National Park.*