

# Snow Leopard and Turkestan Lynx Poaching in Central Asia

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Of the many problems facing the republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan after the break-up of the USSR, poaching of endangered animals is of particular concern. Everything is up for sale through the black market, networks of acquaintances, middlemen or even advertisements in the newspapers: horns, skins, mounted trophies, animal parts for traditional medicine. Interest in snow leopard and Turkestan lynx (*Lynx lynx isabellinus* Blyth), and skins and horns from mountain sheep and goats sharply increased in 1992-93, and prices grew unusually high.

Earlier, in Kyrgyzstan, snow leopard skins were traded for the equivalent of one horse or five domestic sheep, but today skins are worth 30 to 150 times more. Depending on location, snow leopard skins could be obtained during the winter of 1993-94 for a price equal to US\$500-2,000 or 1-4 million roubles, 7-27 thousand somas (the local currency). Lynx skins were selling for US\$200-500; arkhari (*Ovis ammon karelini*) horn, US\$100-200. Good examples of horns for hunting displays could be 10 times higher. Mountain goat horns were selling two to three times cheaper than arkhari.

The scale of poaching is enormous. By personal observation during the winter of 1993-94 in the village of Pokrovka (now called Kyzyl-Su), skins were being sold of snow leopards trapped along the northern slope of the Terskei Alatau in the following river basins: Chon-Kyzyl-Su, Kichi-Kyzyl-Su, Dzhukuchak, Dzhuuka, Chichkan, and Barskaun. No fewer than 12 snow leopard skins and 34 lynx skins were for sale through a dealer. However, not all the lynx skins were fresh, and apparently some had been caught in previous years. The general area inhabited by snow leopard in these basins totals 1,500 km<sup>2</sup>; by lynx, 450 km<sup>2</sup>. Thus the total number of snow leopard and lynx trapped here during the winter of 1993-94 may represent up to half the wild population.

Another 10 skins of snow leopards trapped in the winter of 1993-94 appeared through a dealer in Karakol (formerly called Pokrovka). These animals were caught by a shepherd in the Sary-Dzhaz basin of the Bzhety-Oguzskiy region. It is not possible to determine more precisely the place where they were caught since they were being sold through a middleman.

My opinion is that the current scale of poaching may be three to four times greater than in previous times. Before the break-up of the USSR, snow leopards were caught especially by hunter-shepherds who lived in remote regions of the Tien Shan, but now people with little experience, who are novice hunters, are engaging in the activity. The reason is primarily the poverty of local people. In the winter of 1993-94 the value of a snow leopard skin for sale was more than 60 times higher than the minimum yearly wage in Kyrgyzstan. Thus it is hard to believe that there will be a decrease in poaching in the near future.

Even one of the main prey objects of the snow leopard -- the grey marmot (*Marmot baibacina*) -- is increasingly being sold. Their skins cost the equivalent of three dollars now. Earlier, the maximum number of marmots caught by hunters in a season was 600-800. Today, apparently the number is fewer, since the density of marmots has fallen in much of the region.

The main markets are located in Russia and among foreign tourists. However, despite the black markets, there may be a decrease in the number of tourists in Central Asia and Kazakhstan due to instability in the region and the poverty of local people, who do not have the means to sell and

transfer contraband. Notwithstanding this, dealers for skins and horns are meanwhile continuing to enlarge their net of middlemen, and the demand for traps and gun cartridges is not declining.

*[Kathleen Braden, who translated the above notes, says that in Bishbek (formerly Frunze), the capital of Kyrgyzstan, biologists at the Academy of Sciences said that even a live snow leopard had been advertized for sale in a newspaper during the summer of 1993.]*