

Snow leopard's back repaired

By Susan Lindee

Express Staff Writer

With his paws taped down, his tongue hanging out and his heart beating a steady pulse, Frosty the snow leopard made it through a delicate spinal operation Thursday.

Surrounded by medical specialists who were more accustomed to working on human patients, the 82-pound cat was anesthetized into peaceful sleep through the four-hour operation at the zoo's medical center.

The surgeons hoped to restore him to his former status as one of the best breeding leopards at the San Antonio Zoo.

"We hope it won't take him long to get back in the swing of things," said zoo veterinarian Dr. Kenneth C. Fletcher.

The San Antonio Zoo is famous for its successful breeding of snow leopards, which are an endangered species. Frosty has played a big part in that success.

He came to the San Antonio Zoo in 1970, after being captured in an animal trap in the Soviet Union.

The trap destroyed the inner toe on his left front paw, but otherwise Frosty was in great shape and proved to be unusually fertile.

In his 12 or so years in captivity, the cream-colored cat has sired at least 20 leopard pups, which have been sent to zoos all over the world.

Recently, however, pressure on the big cat's spinal column from a protruding disc reduced him to a virtual cripple.

"He was having trouble walking, losing all strength in his back legs," said Fletcher. "He was in a lot of pain."

In the Thursday operation, orthopedic surgeon Dr. Bill Bilderback removed Frosty's top vertebra to take pressure off the spinal column.

Fletcher said he didn't have the equipment needed for the difficult operation, so he had to call in a physician who specializes in back surgery for humans.

"My patients can usually tell me where it hurts," Bilderback joked as he worked.

Frosty, of course, could say nothing — but he didn't look one bit comfortable stretched out on the operating table with his back cut open and a tube down his throat.

"He'll be all right," said Fletcher.

If nothing else, the operation will at least reduce the cat's discomfort.

"And even if he can't perform," Fletcher said, "we can still use his sperm to impregnate leopard females."