

# Open season on snow leopard and HK could catch the flak

By COLIN MACKAY

HONGKONG could become the target of an international uproar over the killing of the almost-extinct snow leopard.

A commercial safari from Dallas is understood to have passed through the territory two weeks ago to hunt snow leopards under a controversial new commercial agreement with the Mongolian Government.

The Peoples' Republic of Mongolia, which is hard-pressed for foreign currency, has come up with a scheme whereby safari hunters can keep the pelt and head of any snow leopard they

kill for the equivalent of 10,000 in US currency.

The "maiden" safari is expected to start in Hongkong within a few weeks, perhaps carrying snow leopard trophies such as skins or heads, which are illegal in Hongkong.

The Hongkong Government is a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which seeks to protect endangered animal species.

The snow leopard is the rarest big cat in the world's mountains, according to a Hongkong conservation expert who has been keeping a close watch on the situation.

The Mongolian and Pol-

ish wildlife specialists put the snow leopards remaining in Mongolia at between 2,000 and 4,000.

This contradicts sharply with the estimate of Manchester zoologist Mr David Mallon, who recently tracked snow leopards in Mongolia for a year. He said there are only 500 to 900 in the country.

According to an official of China's Xining zoo, there are only 15 snow leopards in Chinese zoos and 64 in other zoos around the world.

Although trade in snow leopard pelts is illegal in most Asian countries, a good-quality snow leopard coat can fetch up to HK\$468,000 on the Japanese and American black markets, the conservationist said.

He said the snow leopard safaris are being run by an American company, Kleinburger Brothers of Dallas. It is charging clients HK\$78,000 for the safari, excluding air fares.

Animal lovers and conservationists have been shocked by the Mongolian Government's unprecedented commercial hunting deal.

The World Wildlife Fund of Hongkong has made strong but fruitless overtures to Mongolia to stop the safaris.

The conservationist said the

Hongkong Agricultural and Fisheries Department was also keeping a close eye on the situation. Department officers will confiscate any snow leopard skins smuggled into Hongkong and will take legal action against the "owners".

Agriculture and Fisheries spokesman John Tam said his department was very interested in any information that would enable action to be taken.

The Mongolian Government, which has never been a signatory to the CITIES treaty, has emphasised that leopard "targets" must be livestock predators. It says a quota of five leopards a year has been set for Kleinburger Bros.

However, Mr Mallon said the animals were not the fierce farmyard livestock predators that would have made them a "pest and a target". In fact, snow leopards almost exclusively hunt in the wild.

Hongkong World Wildlife Fund project chairman Dr Ken Searle said: "Any government which issues a licence to hunt an animal as endangered as the snow leopard is acting in a very reprehensible manner."

Chinese mountain people themselves appear to be far from unblemished, according to the conservationist.

"A number of snow leopard skins are flagrantly offered for sale in Beijing, while there are reports of pelts being readily available in Guangzhou, Kashgar (near the Pakistan border) and in Tibet," he said.

Millionaire zoo owner Mr John Aspinall, who has bred snow leopards in his private zoo in Kent in southern England, said the safaris are a "terrible setback, a very unwise move".

He described snow leopards as having "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 only found in the high mountain regions of central Asia — the Himalayas, the Pamir mountains in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along the Sino-Russian border mountains, Mongolia and Qinghai and Tibet.

The Hongkong conservationist said a number of measures have been introduced to protect the leopard from man's encroachment and hunters' weapons.

There are now leopard reserves in the Kunjerab pass of Pakistan, a 1,400-km park in Nepal and a million-hectare reserve in China on the western flanks of the Himalayas.

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