

## Saving Their Skins; Pay herders not to hunt snow leopards? Villagers laughed at first

### Full Text:

RARE CAT: The leopard's pelts and bones attract top dollar in Asia's black markets.

THE MONGOLIAN INTERPRETER thought we were crazy. "Help me understand," he said, suppressing a smile while the local herders awaited his translation. "You are saying that the American people love the snow leopard so much, they are offering to buy new sheep and goats for the Mongolian herders if they promise not to hunt the snow leopard?" He was smiling openly now. "That's right," we said. Now we were smiling, too, as he explained our offer to the dozen or so people in the room. By the time he finished, the whole room had broken up in laughter.

No one in the remote desert town of Noyonhome to 100 families and a boarding school had ever heard such a proposition. But it made sense to the International Snow Leopard Trust, which had sent us to the South Gobi Desert to see how its "herder incentive program" was coming along. After all, even a fine cashmere-bearing red goat doesn't cost much more than \$15, whereas the snow leopard is invaluable, one of the rarest wild cats in the world. Fewer than 7,000 remain in the wild.

The idea behind the incentive program is to change the behavior of the people who kill endangered animals. The program aims to convince herders to stop hunting and trapping snow leopard even though the cats attack livestock and are valued for their meat and pelts. In exchange, herders receive compensations such as warm clothing, veterinary services and cash for goats and sheep lost to leopards. The Trust recruits local herders to serve as middlemen in these transactions and as on-site conservationists; they are the key to establishing credibility with other herders. For the moment, however, we had only our bemused interpreter as a go-between.

Herders in the South Gobi province tend more than 1 million goats and sheep, an important source of the world's raw cashmere. The area's snow leopards, in contrast, number only several hundred. These few, elusive animals live at lower altitudes than any other snow leopards in the wild, a distinction that makes them particularly interesting and accessible for study. While most people associate snow leopards with the high white peaks of the Himalayas, the South Gobi doesn't fit that picture. Its mountains generally run only to 7,000 or 8,000 feet, rising in short, broken chains from the world's coldest desert, a plateau with an average altitude of 5,000 feet. There is snow in the winter, but not much. In the summer, it rains. Snow leopards in the South Gobi migrate in tandem with nomadic herders and their flocks, following seasonal pastures up and down the mountains. Mongol herders, who take great pride in their knowledge of animal husbandry, view the loss of livestock to predators as a mark of shame, and they do not let a stock-killing leopard prowl for long. After all, they must see their families through the winter, and those families tend to be quite large.

Snow leopard furs have long been prized as coats, blankets and rugs, and today snow leopards are worth more than ever. Trading their pelts became illegal worldwide in 1975, but the sales continue in black markets throughout Asia. There's also a growing black market for snow leopard bone to substitute for tiger bone in Chinese medicines. Despite the South Gobi's proximity to China, we found that Noyon herders are not yet in the business of hunting snow leopards for their bones. After killing a leopard, they keep or sell the skin and eat the meat, which they believe to have medicinal qualities, but they have no use for the bones.

The people of Noyon laughed when they heard our proposal, but they grew thoughtful later that evening when the herdsman Sharav arrived. One of the first people recruited to the incentive program, Sharav knew more than anyone about the area's snow leopards. Today he had traveled 25 miles by horseback to bring his daughter for the start of school, and he took the opportunity to make an appeal to the villagers. The room was quiet as Sharav detailed the modest funds he had received from the project, how he had visited neighbors to determine whether leopards had been responsible for livestock deaths, and how he gave out warm boots and cash in the lean winter times to those who had lost animals. Everyone seemed impressed when he said he no longer hunted snow leopards but instead followed their tracks around, "stuffing" his head full of knowledge about them. Sharav had counted snow leopards in his area by studying their footprints. From this he estimated a predator-prey ratio of one leopard per 40 ibex (wild goats). Fewer ibex, he warned, would mean more leopard attacks on livestock. Sharav introduced the herdsman Buud, who told an amazing story. When she was a girl, she said, her father shot and wounded a snow leopard. That night, the leopard came to their tent and pounced down through the smokehole, mauling her father. Herders read this as a warning to respect the power of the snow leopard.

We took our leave that night after distributing some small gifts. In the remaining two weeks of our visit, 10 Noyon herders said they were interested in joining the program. What had first seemed crazy to them now made sense. Often, conservation projects in remote areas fail because their funds, like desert rains, evaporate at high levels. Money dissipates in urban capitals; if it reaches the countryside at all, only a trickle remains. Our job, and Sharav's, was to make sure this didn't happen with the snow leopard program. In the town of Noyon, at least, the rains were coming down.