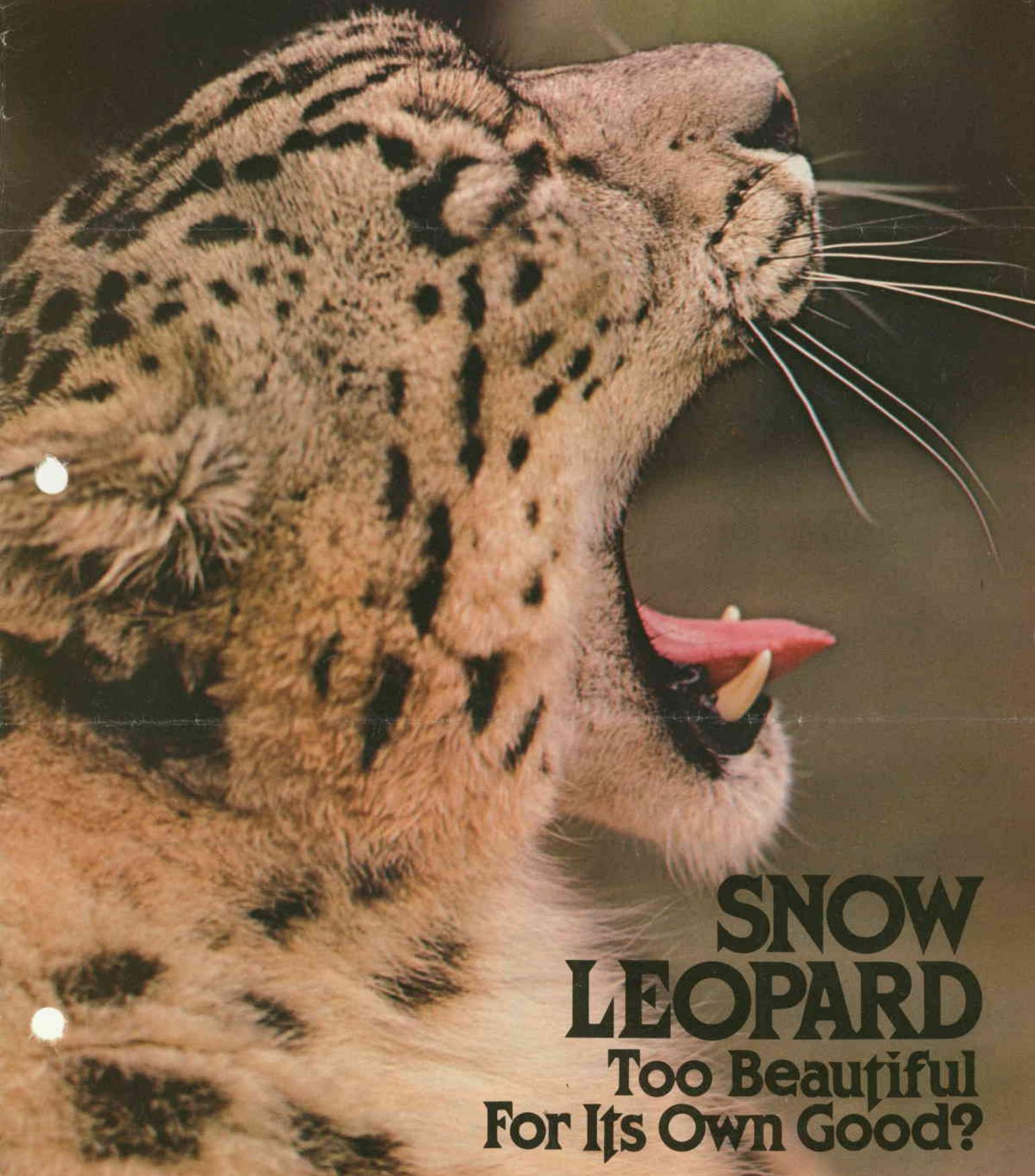


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**SNOW
LEOPARD**
Too Beautiful
For Its Own Good?



NO TRESPASSING, HERE!
Big cats like these need quite a bit of land. And each cat is ready to defend its "turf." Snow leopard territory includes the Himalayas, Pamirs, Hindu Kush, Tian Shan, and Altai mountains of Central Asia. But even snow leopards can't keep human civilization from "taming" these rugged lands.

© Animals Animals Photo
by Karen Tweedy-Holmes

NEPAL'S SNOW LEOPARD

TOO BEAUTIFUL FOR HIS OWN GOOD?

BY JEANNE O'NEILL

The snow leopard is exceedingly rare. But this beautiful cat still lives—thanks mainly to its rugged homeland. Few human visitors will brave its natural habitat for long. Few westerners have even seen this sort of land—or heard of the region the snow leopard inhabits in the Himalayan mountains of northwestern Nepal. Here, where the soil is poor and vegetation is sparse, the snow leopard makes its home.

Its den is a sheltered space between or beneath the rocks.

Its coat is thick to the very tip of its tail—and yet this coat is light. A snow leopard's fur must enable it to withstand both the bitter cold of winter and the heat of a mid-summer's day. Snow leopard paws are large and broad—with hair cushions along the sole. An adult-size snow leopard weighs in at about 100 pounds and may be over six feet long. Its extra-big feet help this cat keep its balance.

The snow leopard is known for its leaps. And these leaps take it—without struggle—from ledge to ledge along the cliffs of its isolated Himalayan wilderness.

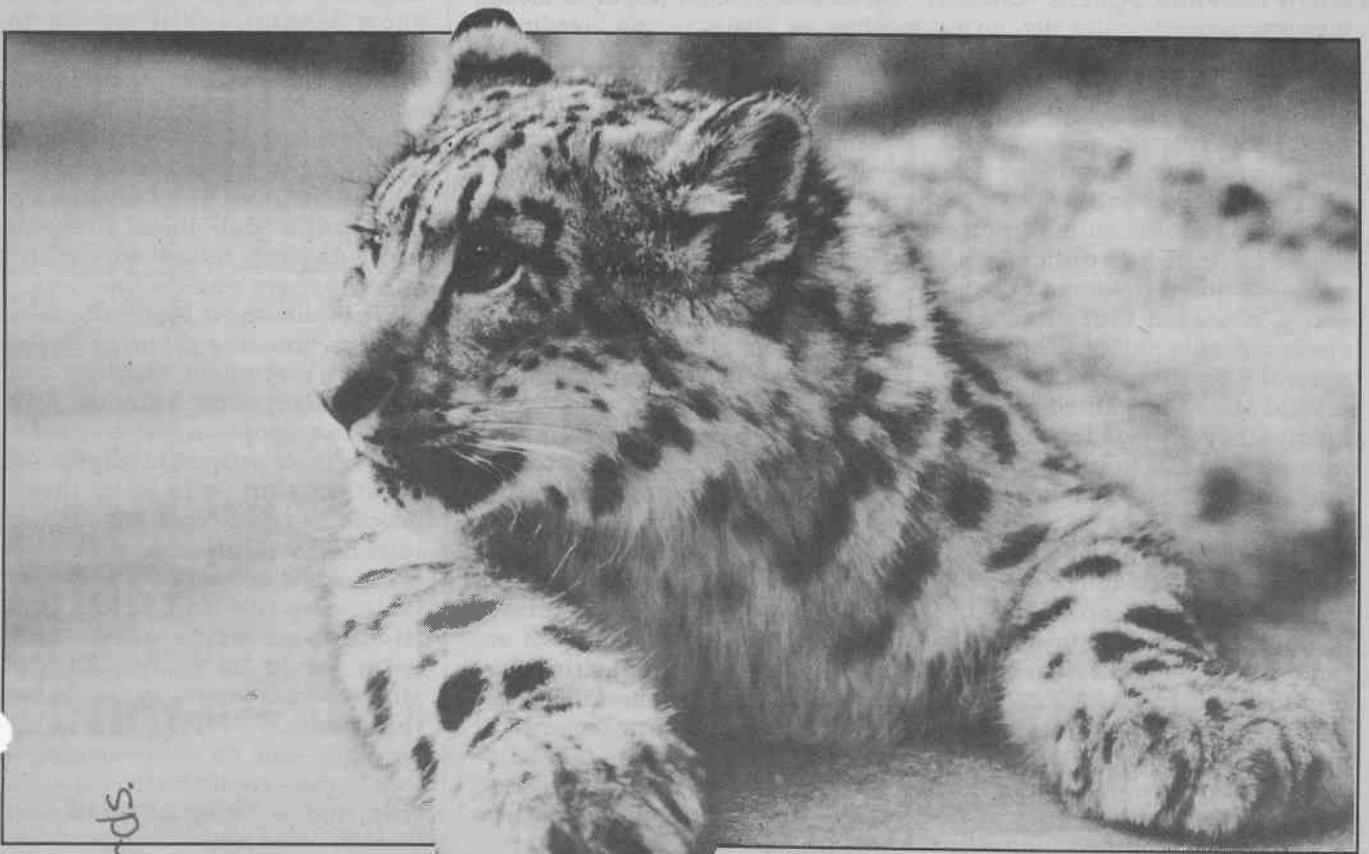
The snow leopard is a creature designed for—or adapted to—the mountains of Central Asia. It prefers elevations from 3,000 to 4,500 meters—above the timberline (the highest elevation at which trees can still grow), but below the permanent snowcap. And it seeks lands relatively untouched by human civilization. The mountains of northwestern Nepal are—in a way—a natural retreat for this very special—and endangered—animal. But even there the snow leopard is in trouble. The rugged wilderness it lives in is rapidly disappearing. And so, too, are the snow leopards. In fact, there may be fewer than 120 members of the species left in Nepal today. And people living in this region rarely catch sight of these beautiful creatures.

The snow leopard is a "shy," solitary animal for the most part. It hunts alone—and it rests alone in its rocky den. Snow leopards remain alone except, of course, during mating season—when couples sometimes hunt together—and during breeding season—when snow leopard mothers hunt

with their young. A snow leopard's diet includes wild sheep, ibex (wild goats), and an occasional young yak (a long-haired kind of ox). As you can see, snow leopard appetites tend to be large. If these cats normally hunted in groups, they might never find enough food in a given area to satisfy themselves. And so, each cat marks off and defends its own territory.

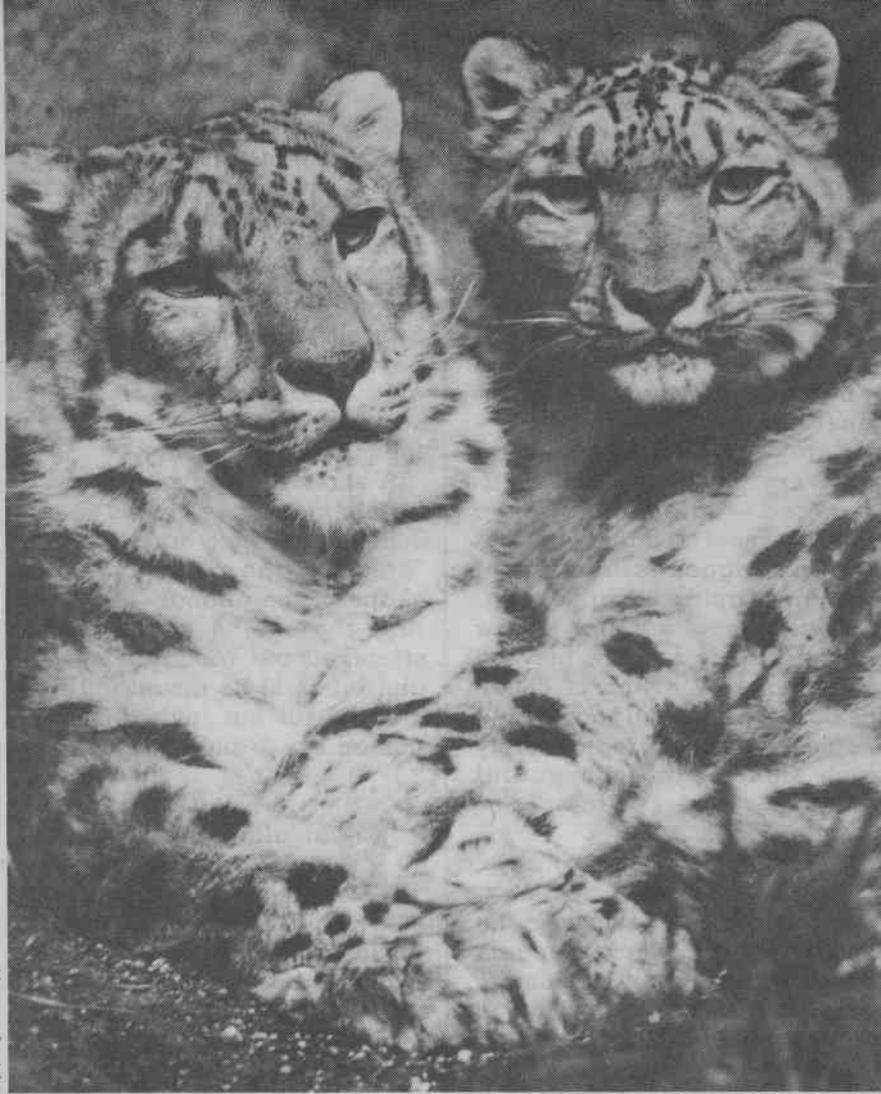
A snow leopard's "privacy" is further guaranteed by its spotted coat. Black spots on a pale coat "break up" the outline or general shape of the animal—and confuse the eye. A snow leopard stretched out among the rocks and brush of its mountain home may be all but invisible to the human eye—and to its prey.

But although snow leopards are hard to see—they are surprisingly easy to kill. Human hunters—living in the remote, and often poor, mountain villages of northwestern Nepal—use poisoned spears. In a single hunting expedition, hundreds of these spears can be
(Continued on next page)



Kenneth W

snow
leopards.



D. & R. Sullivan

SNOW LEOPARD COUPLE "CAUGHT" ON CAMERA! Snow leopards, though they are normally quite shy, do get together for mating — and breeding — seasons.

planted in the ground — along trails left by wild sheep, musk deer, or snow leopards. The spearhead is positioned with care — so that an animal returning to its trail has difficulty escaping without a wound of some sort — a wound that allows the spear's deadly poison to enter the animal's bloodstream.

Wild sheep are killed for their meat—they provide food for hunters and their families. Musk deer, though, are the main target for poachers. Musk is used as a base in certain perfumes. And people who want musk are willing to pay a high economic and ecological price to obtain it. Killing adult male musk deer lowers reproduction rates for these animals. But, by killing adult male musk deer, hunters may be able to bring in enough cash to last their families an entire year.

The snow leopard, on the other

hand, brings hunters very little in terms of cash.

There was a time when snow leopard pelts (skins) were in great demand. The pelts were turned into collars and cuffs, jackets, coats, and capes. And just one of these pelts could bring the hunter a great deal of money. So, people hunted the snow leopard until it became endangered.

Today, though, the Nepalese government has succeeded in stopping tourists from exporting snow leopard pelts. And traders from other nations are — for the most part—unwilling to purchase snow leopard pelts from hunters. Trade in the valuable furs of endangered species is restricted by international agreement. And the marketplace for snow leopard fur has, in effect, been closed — thanks to concerned governments, especially the Nepalese government.

But the snow leopard is still endangered.
Why?

One reason is pride. Snow leopard pelts are still "status symbols" of sorts to Nepalese hunters. Since snow leopards are so scarce—some hunters think of snow leopard skins as proof of their hunting skill.

Another reason—the main reason—is poverty. The dry climate and poor soil in Nepal's remote mountain villages mean that their agricultural productivity is limited. And trade ordinarily isn't profitable because cargo must be carried down from the mountains along trails that are just too narrow for large beasts of burden. And so, many of these people are forced to hunt in order to survive.

Unfortunately, their hunting techniques not only kill snow leopards intentionally — but unintentionally as well.

How?

Many of these hunters kill wild sheep, not snow leopards. But, by killing wild sheep, these hunters help to deplete the snow leopard's food supply. So some of the snow leopards will starve to death.

One of the hunting techniques also threatens the snow leopard. Many hunters set grass and brush fires in order to drive wildlife in great numbers toward their traps. But, these fires, in turn, destroy areas where the snow leopard and its prey live.

What the snow leopard needs is large preserve areas in Nepal where government officials can effectively police hunters. And what the people need is a solution to their economic plight—a solution that will help these people develop, and save, their land and wildlife.

But some conservationists say it is already too late. This Himalayan wilderness, they warn, could be completely destroyed—perhaps—by the end of this century. Might the snow leopard—and its untamed mountain home—really be too rare, too wild, and too beautiful for its own good?

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