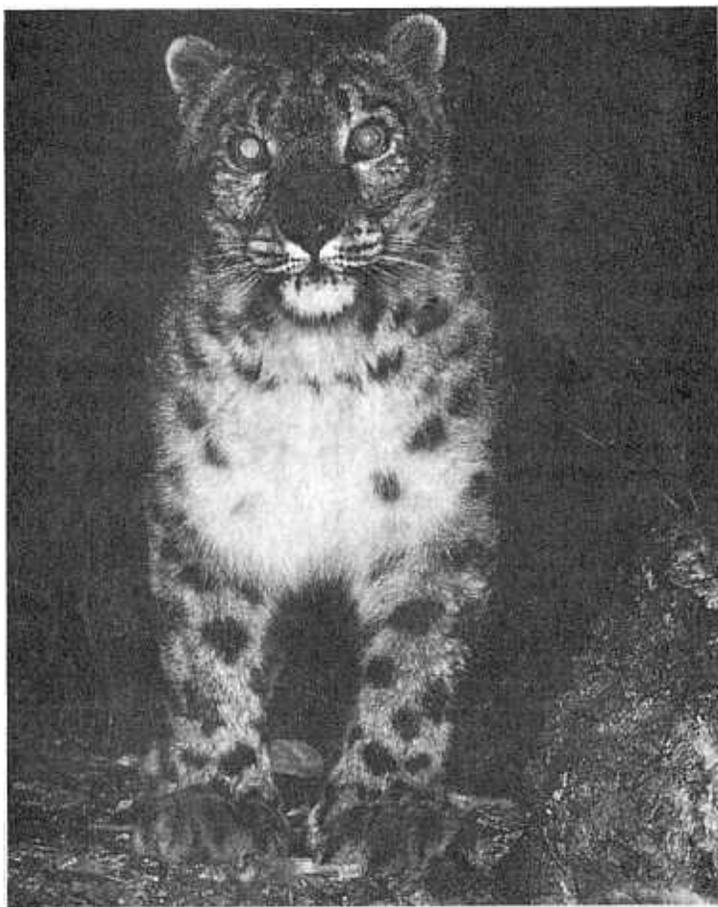


Gift of snow leopard cub: concern conservationists

By Kaleem Omar



A rare photograph of a snow leopard in its natural habitat.

KARACHI, Sept. 22: Wildlife conservationists here have expressed dismay and concern over the news that a snow leopard cub was presented to Prime Minister Mohammed Khan Junejo by Azad Kashmir's President Abdul Qayum Khan at a public meeting in Muzaffarabad on Sunday. "Public officials presenting snow leopard cubs to each other is hardly the way to set a good example to people in our efforts to protect this highly endangered species of animal," commented a wildlife expert while talking to this correspondent.

Another conservationist said that the snow leopard cub should not have been taken away from its mother in the first place. "But now that it has, who is going to look after it?" he asked. "The Lahore Zoo already has a snow leopard, which has to be kept in an airconditioned cage for most of the year because of the city's hot climate.

And Islamabad Zoo is the pits. It is so badly run that it can't even properly look after the elephant presented to President Zia-ul-Haq by Sri Lanka's President Jayawardene. This elephant is kept tied-up most of the time and gets very little exercise. So how can Islamabad Zoo be expected to properly care for a much more delicate animal like a snow leopard?"

The snow leopard, *Panthera uncia*, is one of the rarest of the world's large, endangered cats. Snow leopards inhabit the remote and rugged mountains of Central Asia, ranging over a vast area of 500,000 square miles from the Langu gorge in north-western Nepal to the Hindu Kush of northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Snow leopards are also to be found in parts of Tibet, China's Qinghai and Sichuan Province, as well as along the Soviet Union's border with China and the Mongo-

lian People's Republic.

Populations are so sparse and local census figures in these areas so uncertain that no accurate figures exist for the total number of now leopards remaining in the world. But wildlife experts are unanimous in their view that the species is in increasing danger of becoming extinct, largely as a result of the activities of poachers

who hunt the animal for the price they can get for its skin.

Dr. and Mrs. Edge, and American couple affiliated with the University of Montana, who have been in Pakistan since last October in connection with an ibex conservation project in the Kirthar area sponsored by the US Department of Wildlife and Fisheries recently reported seeing snow leopard skins being sold in Kashgar bazar for 30 dollars each.

And only last week there was a report of an American woman journalist buying a full-length snow leopard-skin coat from a furrier in Peshawar. The amount she paid for the coat is not known but to create a coat of the highest quality would take the best part of as many as a dozen pelts and could command a price of upwards of 60,000 dollars on the international black-market.

The snow leopard is listed as an endangered species in the "Red Data Book" published annually by the Switzerland-based International Union for Nature Conservation (IUNC), which is the scientific arm of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In October this year, the Seattle-based International Snow Leopard Trust, in collaboration with the IUNC, the WWF and other conservationist organisations, is organising the first ever International Conference on Snow Leopards in Srinagar, the capital of Indian-occupied Kashmir.

The conference is expected to be attended by wildlife experts from all over the world, who will spend a week reviewing the measures adopted by the various concerned

countries to protect the snow leopard and suggesting ways of further improving such efforts.

Nepal is a country that has of late been particularly active in the field. Since 1973 the Nepalese Department of National Parks and Conservation has created no fewer than six mountain parks and reserves where the snow leopard is a fully protected animal, a remarkable effort for a country of only 54,362 square miles.

By contrast, the only game reserve in Pakistan where the snow leopard is protected species is Chitral Gol, which is estimated to contain no more than 30 snow leopards. Possibly another 200 or so snow leopards inhabit other parts of Pakistan, among them northern Hunza and the Baltoro glacier region near Skardu.

Until recently almost nothing was known about the snow leopard's habits and life in the wild, which is hardly surprising given its shyness, superb camouflage and challenging habitat. Few people have even been lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the coat in its natural surroundings.

Most encounters involve villagers searching for firewood or herding livestock and big game hunters stalking a trophy. Snow leopard cubs in captivity are even rarer, although this correspondent did once come across a pair in Baltit (now Karimabad) in 1954 that some villagers had presented to the late Mir of Hunza.

The name "snow leopard" is something of a misnomer, because the prey it feeds on is usually to be found below the permanent snow line. But snow leopards have been known to cross passes as high as 18,000 feet or range across high glaciers as they move from valley to valley in search of food.

In Chitral and Hunza this diet consists mostly of marmots and other rodents, supplemented by an occasional ibex and sometimes even by a sheep or a cow, though instances of snow leopards attacking domestic animals are rare.

But what will become of the snow leopard cub presented to Mr. Junejo? It is not yet known precisely where in Azad Kashmir the cub was captured or whether its mother is still alive. However, even if the mother has been killed by those who captured the cub, it would still be possible to reintroduce the cub into its natural habitat after it has grown sufficiently to be able to fend for itself.

Of course, caring for the cub until it reaches that stage would take the services of an expert, somebody like Karachi-based Linda Bernard who two years ago in Nepal became one of the few people to successfully care for an abandoned leopard cub and reintroduce it into its natural environment — an exercise that involved Ms Bernard spending several months camping out in the jungle with the cub. Talking to this correspondent on Monday, Ms Bernard said she was ready to do the same for the snow leopard cub.

