

Rinchen Wangchuk – (1969-2011)



June 2011: *Sujatha Padmanabhan, (Environment educator, Kalpavriksh) writes about Rinchen Wangchuk's indomitable spirit, life-changing initiatives and his legacy.*

On March 26, 2011, the world of conservation became poorer by the passing away of Rinchen Wangchuk, the Founder and Director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust (SLC-IT) in Leh. Rinchen had been ill for the past three years, having been diagnosed with a deteriorating neurological condition for which traditional medical systems and allopathy have no cure yet. Over the past decade, Rinchen, affectionately referred to as the “snow leopard man” by friends, had played a pivotal role in Ladakh, having initiated one of the most successful community-based initiatives that had changed local people’s perceptions of predators like the snow leopard and Tibetan wolf from “pests” to a valued asset.

I first met Rinchen in 2002 and remember him as being fairly shy and reticent. This made it tough for me to assuage my curiosity about his work, his NGO, Ladakh’s wildlife, his experiences in the field and of course the elusive predator that everyone who visits Ladakh hopes to see! Little did I realize that I would have ample time to learn about all of the above and more. In 2005, Rinchen invited me to help develop a conservation education programme for children in Ladakh that focussed on local wild biodiversity.

In the past few years I have spent a considerable amount of time in Ladakh with the staff of the SLC-IT, travelling to remote villages to implement the programme in government schools. Under Rinchen's guidance and leadership, the team at SLC-IT developed one of the most successful models of community-based tourism in the Hemis National Park, the Sham region of Ladakh and Zaskar. The Ladakh Himalayan Homestays programme helped the poorest families in villages along popular trekking routes earn an income from tourism. This helped, in part, to offset to a certain extent the economic losses incurred when their livestock was predated upon by snow leopards and Tibetan wolves and fuelled attitudinal changes of villagers towards predators.

The Ladakh Homestay programme was recognised internationally and won several awards including the 'First Choice Responsible Tourism Award' at the World Travel Market, London in 2004 and the *Travel and Leisure Magazine's* '2005 Global Vision Award for Community Outreach, New York' in 2005. It was also one of 10 finalists in 'The Geotourism Challenge', sponsored by National Geographic's Centre for Sustainable Destinations and Ashoka Changemakers, Washington D.C. However, the greatest recognition came from Rumbak, the first village in the Hemis National Park where SLC-IT initiated their work. The villagers took Rinchen Wangchuk and his colleague Jigmet Dadul by surprise when they welcomed them to the village (Rinchen and Jigmet were there to attend a meeting) honouring them with not only *kathaks* (white silk scarves used to honour or thank someone), but with pots of *chang* (local alcohol made from fermented barley). This kind of gesture is usually reserved for revered *lamas* or government officials!

Another major initiative of the SLC-IT was working with communities to build predator-proof livestock enclosures. Between 2000 and 2009, SLC-IT predator-proofed 22 community livestock enclosures and 43 individual pens across 19 villages. Rinchen and his team found out that retributive killings of snow leopards often took place due to multiple killings of livestock when the predators managed to enter poorly constructed corrals. Rinchen also helped local communities earn additional income by helping them set up eco-cafes along trekking routes and initiated handicrafts training projects. He also helped start a community-based Livestock Insurance Programme in some villages in the Sham valley in Ladakh.

Rinchen worked quietly and selflessly, never seeking publicity for the significant work he did. Very recently, his efforts won him the Helen Freeman Award for Snow Leopard Conservation in 2010 and an award for Outstanding Achievements in Community-Based Snow Leopard Conservation in 2011.

Rinchen was a true gentleman, whose gentle nature and spirit touched every person who met him. The courage that he displayed right till the very end was remarkable. Even as his body failed him, making it difficult for him to speak even a few words, he retained his interest in everything around him. I still remember him sitting in a wheelchair in his guest room looking out at the distant Stok Kangri snow-clad peak and telling us, with no rancor, about his experiences trekking up there. And true to his indomitable courage (did it come from the Buddhist meditation and chanting that he practiced, I often wondered), he would mouth the word "perfect" in response to being asked how he was feeling until his last moments.

Rinchen will no doubt find peace amongst the snow-covered peaks and snow leopards he loved, which is the only solace for his family and friends who have been left grieving by his very untimely departure.

http://www.sanctuaryasia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5973:rinchen-wangchuk-1969-2011&catid=592:in-remembrance