

## WWF Progress Report: Irbis Enterprises Snow Leopard Conservation Incentive Project

### Full Text:

Introduction Irbis means Snow Leopard in Mongolian. Irbis Enterprises is a community-based conservation project that operates in western and southern Mongolia where nomadic herders have shared the mountains with snow leopards, ibex and argali sheep for thousands of years. As an incentive to help preserve this delicate ecosystem Irbis Enterprises offers an income generating opportunity by marketing knitted goods and felt items which are handmade by the herders using wool from their livestock: sheep, camels, yaks, and cashmere goats. The majority of the profits are returned directly to the herder-producers, who, due to their remoteness, otherwise have little opportunity to take advantage of the recently introduced market economy. Some of the proceeds are placed in a conservation fund to be used for initiatives beneficial to both the local community and the local environment. The link with snow leopard conservation is direct, in that participants must sign a contract committing to specific practices for the benefit of snow leopards and their prey. These include adherence to grazing regulations in the adjacent protected areas, and a promise not to poach snow leopards or their large ungulate prey. A bonus of 20% is paid to the producers if all terms are met each year. Breaking of the contract carries penalties ranging from being removed from the program for a year in the case of grazing violations, to the entire community losing their annual bonus if a snow leopard is killed.

At the present time projects have been initiated in two areas in Mongolia; Uvs Aimag in the northwest and Gobi Altai Aimag in the southwest. Both areas are important for snow leopards and have been the focus of long term ecological studies. Irbis Enterprises is supported by a coalition of Mongolian and international nature conservation organizations and Protected Areas, which have a particular interest in the protection of snow leopards. Project activities in Uvs are supported by WWF and those in the Gobi by a coalition of international conservation organizations. Common costs incurred in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, are shared.

### Background

Irbis Enterprises was established in response to research carried out among herders near the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area in the summer of 1997. A survey revealed that herders were concerned that they were getting low prices for the sale of their livestock products (sheep and camel wool, cashmere, sheep and goatskins), because of the great distance to good markets. By creating finished products and selling them on an international, ecologically aware market, it was assumed that herders could add substantially to the value to the raw materials. Spinning with a drop spindle and knitting are common skills in herding households, making this an income generating opportunity accessible to many. Our research found a strong demand for this type of hand-crafted products in the USA and UK, indicating it would be viable to pursue this concept internationally. However, it was agreed that during the pilot year we would sell our "snow leopard friendly" products only on the tourist market within Mongolia.

### Local Information Dissemination and Sample Collection Summer 1998

Before launching the project on a large scale in both Uvs and Gobi-Altai, it was necessary to assess the level of interest and knitting ability among the herding communities. The project would only be effective from a conservation point of view if there was widespread participation, because that would allow peer pressure to become an issue (see conservation linkage below). Accompanied by biologists and managers from Protected Areas we met with local government officials and organized public meetings for herders in the target som (administrative) centers to introduce the project.

At the public meetings biologists explained the need to protect snow leopards, using examples of other large cats that are close to extinction because of human pressure. Irbis Enterprises was presented as a way for the Protected Areas and international nature conservation agencies to help herders increase their household income in return for local help in protecting snow leopards. Finally, interested families were asked to make samples of products for use in market research. Leaflets with ideas for products and prices were distributed at the meetings. Finished sample products were purchased a few weeks later. Quality varied greatly, indicating that precise instructions and quality controls would be required to ensure consistency of products for the market.

### Market Research

The sample products were brought to Ulaanbaatar and used to create a display as a focus for the market research. The display featured photographs of herders and snow leopards and a written introduction in Mongolian, English, Japanese and French. The knitted items were numbered and research participants were asked to comment on individual items and give suggestions for prices and possible retail outlets. It was hosted at the Natural History Museum and at popular restaurants. It was also hosted at the British Embassy's weekly social night to gain input from resident foreigners.

A total of 225 questionnaires were completed (*Appendix 1*). The data were analyzed to assess consumer preferences in terms of product type and material and to set prices. Using camel wool products as a base, the cost of labor in relation to the cost of the material was calculated, and this was used to set the price for cashmere and sheep wool products. Responses about

product preference were used to compile an order list.

### Local Management

After conducting the market research we returned to the field autumn of 1998 to order the products and to set up a system for locally managing collection and quality control. Discussions with protected area staff and some officials determined that each area should have a local coordinator within travelling distance from the herders, and a regional coordinator who could maintain communications with outside agencies. We selected local coordinators using the following criteria: they must be able to knit and give advice about knitting; they must have some level of education because of the administrative demands of the job; and they must be quite well known in the herding community.

In Uvs one young woman who had completed a training course in garment manufacture was appointed, and another who had been women's league representative. The regional coordinator is Buyantsog, the WWF Snow Leopard Conservation Project representative for the aimag (a biologist). In the Gobi the regional coordinator is Zolzaga, the Gobi Park storekeeper, (she was formerly a vet and is therefore well known in the area). Both local coordinators in the Gobi are herders; one was the granddaughter of a well-known elderly herder, the other a community health officer.

All coordinators are under contract and receive a small salary and will also receive a percentage of the total sales revenue at the end of the season in November. This should provide an incentive to ensure good quality.

In each area we ordered a strictly controlled number of products. Each Local Coordinator (LC) kept a master order list of product types (hats, gloves, etc.), sizes, and material (camel, sheep, cashmere wool). Herder-producers also entered into a contract and then signed up with the LC to make up to 4 products at a time. On completion they gave the products to the LC for quality inspection. If acceptable the LC received and stored the product and the producer then signed up to make more products. By limiting each herder to 4 products at a time, popular items for manufacture were shared by all. When the specified number of a product type was reached for the area, the LC accepted no more products of that type. Each producer was given a form for listing items they made and their base prices. This list was totaled when Priscilla Allen purchased the products in May and producers were paid for what they had made. The potential bonus of 20% above the base price will be payable in November if all the conditions stated on the contract have been met.

### Conservation Linkage

The bonus forms the most immediate link between income generation and wildlife conservation. The entire community will lose the bonus if one herder illegally kills a snow leopard, ibex or argali sheep, thus individual incentive is enhanced by peer pressure. Individual producers will lose bonuses for other violations of wildlife laws or grazing regulations in the Protected Area Buffer Zones. The project also offers less tangible but important conservation linkages such as fostering a positive perception of the Protected Area, greater appreciation of the international interest in local wildlife, and increased awareness of wildlife issues in general.

### Purchasing Field work Spring 1999 UVS

In May 1999 Priscilla Allen and Buyantsog traveled to the sites and met first with Sagil Som local coordinator. From the 19 households who had signed up for the project, 12 had made a total of 19 products, which were purchased for a total of over 100,000 Tug. The producers had various backgrounds: 4 are herders, 2 elderly, 5 unemployed, and one nurse. We are confident that there will be more widespread participation later as confidence in the project grows. The collection period was extended to allow more products to be made, which will be delivered to Ulaangom by the LC, transport to Ulaanbaatar will be arranged by Buyantsog.

We then visited coordinator Sunjidmaa in Turgen and purchased the 163 items that she had collected for nearly 600,000 Tug. All 21 households who had signed contracts had participated, of these 4 are herders, 14 are unemployed, and one is a medical technician.

So in total 700,070 Tug (US\$700) worth of products was bought in Uvs, with a bonus of 20% payable in the autumn if the conditions stated on the contracts have not been broken. Forty households participated and 182 items were bought.

We visited several more herder households to spread information about Irbis Enterprises. A high priority in this area is now to encourage greater participation by actual herders, (at present only 20% of producers are herders). To this end it was suggested that a letter be written to all the buffer zone herders, explaining the project and informing them that training will be available in the autumn and encouraging them not sell their wool, but to keep it to make into products for sale next year.

### GOBI

The regional Bayantooroi coordinator had visited the local coordinators earlier in the spring to ensure the collection of products was taking place and to ensure quality control was occurring. Priscilla Allen traveled to the Gobi in early June 1999 in order to purchase the products. From the Bayantooroi area 42 households had signed up and had made a total of 278

products. In Erdene som the coordinators had signed up 17 people who had produced 63 items. In total 1.240.600 Tug (US\$1.250) worth of products were bought in the Gobi. Again the bonus of 20% is payable in the autumn. Out of the 59 producers, 53 are herders, 4 are vegetable growers and 2 are unemployed. The more widespread participation, the greater production and better quality of products in the Gobi than in Uvs can be explained by the fact that more training was provided here in the autumn last year but it is also thanks to the impressive efforts by Zolzaga, the regional Gobi Coordinator.

We also visited Altai som, where misinformation about the project had been provided earlier in the year by the then manager of the GGSPA. Unfortunately he had not consulted the regional coordinator and given misleading information regarding products, prices and timing. We were able to clarify the confusion with the military leader and the som governor and agreed that the project would be introduced in the autumn, and that participation would be invited from herders and also from military households who operate within the park along the Chinese border. Local coordinators will be chosen at that time.

#### Retail Activities

All the products were brought to Ulaanbaatar and are now on sale in the Natural History Museum Ger Store, the Ger Store outside the Bayangol Hotel, at Churchill's Restaurant, the WWF office and various travel agencies. The retail outlets mostly retain 10% of the sales price, some insisted on 15%. Irbis Enterprises had a stand at the International Women's Association of Mongolia's Annual Picnic and Bazaar, where many items were sold. The busiest time for tourists in Mongolia is July and August.

A. Bayarjargal, who has been involved with the establishment of Irbis Enterprises from the beginning and has spent many months in Bayantooroi as an English teacher and interpreter, was appointed General Project Coordinator in June 1999. She will manage the distribution, retail and marketing side of the project in the capital. She will also be responsible for analyzing sales to compile a new order for next year. She will travel to the field to place the orders with the local coordinators as before. We also hope to expand into markets overseas, focussing on special interest outlets such as zoos.

#### Future Developments

With support from WWF we hope to expand to other areas within Uvs where snow leopard human conflicts are apparent, and further into Bayan Ulgi and Khovd Aimags, focussing on areas which contain snow leopards. Also, with continued support from The David Shepherd Conservation Fund and Discovery Initiatives we intend to expand this autumn into two additional soms bordering the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area: Altai and Bayanunder. In cooperation with the Mongolian Association for the Conservation of Nature and Environment we intend to introduce this project in South Gobi Aimag; Gurvan Tes and Noyan soms where a small snow leopard conservation incentive project has been ongoing with support from the International Snow Leopard Trust.

A crucial next step overall is to improve the quality of the products and to ensure consistency in design. This is essential if the project is to expand to markets overseas and grow to become self-sustaining. Therefore it is hoped that the general coordinator will undertake training with experts in the USA or England to become an expert in the preparation, spinning and treatment of camel, cashmere and sheep wool. She will then run short courses for the herder producers in each of the locations in order to share her skills.

*Appendix 1*

**IRBIS ENTERPRISES** Market Research Summary Conducted in the foyer of the Natural History Museum, Ulaanbaatar. Start Date: August 12, 1998 End Date: August 31, 1998 Questionnaire was available in English, Japanese and French.

Total Number of days: 21

Total Number of Respondents: 225

Product	Average Price	Highest Price	Lowest Price
Camel wool socks		\$7.00	\$30
Camel wool gloves with ibex motif		\$8.00	\$30
Sheep wool hat	\$7.50	\$30	\$1
Angora gloves	\$8.30	\$30	\$1
Cashmere gloves	\$8.50	\$20	\$1
Sheep wool scarf with pattern		\$9.30	\$25
Camel wool mittens		\$6.00	\$20
Cashmere child's mittens	\$7.20	\$20	\$1
Felt mat with argali motif	\$14.60	\$40	\$6
Camel wool hat with ibex motif		\$9.00	\$25
Camel wool earband		\$6.00	\$25
Camel wool child's hat with ibex motif		\$9.00	\$25

Expected Number of Purchases Average total number of products to buy: 4 Highest total number of products to buy: 12

Lowest total number of products to buy: 1

Expected Expenditure

Average total expected expenditure: \$30

Highest total expected expenditure: \$120

Lowest total expected expenditure: \$3

Appendix 2

**IRBIS ENTERPRISES and the PRODUCER Contract** 1998 \_\_\_\_ month until 1999 \_\_\_\_ month

**IRBIS ENTERPRISES agrees to:**

- purchase in May and July 1999 woolen products made by the contractee at the prices stated, on condition that those products meet quality specifications,
- pay a bonus of 20% above the base prices in November 1999 if all terms of the contract have been met.

**The PRODUCER agrees to:**

- make fine quality products for purchase,
- make only those products that they have signed up for with the Local Coordinator,
- deliver all products to the Local Coordinator by 1 May 1999.
- additionally, the producer will: wash wool before spinning,  
remove most long guard hairs, when using camel wool only use "em" wool, wash final product, make all products to size and style specifications, make products according to suggested patterns, or make variations approved by Local Coordinator, while maintaining quality and wildlife motifs.

**CONDITIONS OF PAYING BONUS**

- All producers in the Som will lose the bonus if any member of the Som kills a snow leopard during the Bonus year.
- Individual producers will lose their bonus and be expelled from the program if a household member kills a snow leopard, and ibex or an argali.
- Individual producers will lose their bonus for one year if they violate the laws of the Special Protected Area.
- *Gobi only:* Individual producers will lose their bonus if they allow their livestock to graze within the restricted zone of the Strictly Protected Area.

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRODUCER

\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / 1998

\_\_\_\_\_  
for IRBIS ENTERPRISES

\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / 1998

\_\_\_\_\_  
for STRICTLY PROTECTED AREAS

\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / 1998

*Appendix 3*  
*Text for sales label*

**Irbis** is the Mongolian word for **snow leopard**.

**Irbis Enterprises** is a non-profit coalition of Mongolian and international conservation organizations. We market products handmade by herders who share the mountains with snow leopards, ibex and argali. In return herders agree to help protect these animals.

Purchasing this product will increase a herder's income, help protect endangered snow leopards -- and keep you warm!

*Thank you for your support*

Cashmere            Camel            Sheep

Large                Medium            Price