

Irbis Enterprises

The International Snow Leopard Trust funded the creation of Irbis Enterprises in 1998, along with support from the David Shepherd Conservation Foundation and WWF-Mongolia. In 2000, Irbis Enterprises became an official project of the International Snow Leopard Trust and now operates under the Trust's nonprofit status. The aim of Irbis Enterprises is to provide alternative income sources to nomadic herders who live in snow leopard habitat, thereby reducing conflict between herders and the predator, while also fostering tolerance and appreciation through education.

To protect snow leopards and their mountain ecosystem, grazing limitations must be imposed, predation by leopards on livestock must be reduced or tolerated, and poaching of leopards and their *prey* must be stopped. For herders who have used the areas in question for generations, such limitations cause resentment and a lack of cooperation. Irbis Enterprises aims to ease this problem by offering a financial

incentive to play a positive role in the conservation of snow leopards. The income source is hand-crafted items produced by the herders and made primarily from livestock products such as sheep, camel and cashmere wool, leather, sheepskin and felt. The target population of Irbis Enterprises is the *rural* communities living in and around snow leopard habitat. In 1998, the first year of the program, about 80 households participated. By 2000, the program grew to involve 200 households and the program generated over \$6,000.00 of income for the local communities, or about \$30.00 per participating family. To put this into perspective, \$30.00 is equivalent to one month's salary for a teacher or park ranger. The majority of the cash benefits go directly to the producers, 99% of whom *are* women.

Irbis Enterprises herder-producers work under contracts that specify:

- *No poaching of snow leopards or other endangered species*

- *Tolerance of livestock losses to predation by snow leopards*
- *Avoidance of critical lambing and kidding sites of wild ungulates*
- *Reduction or stabilization of livestock herd sizes*

Ten percent of the sales are placed into a conservation fund, which is managed by a board made up of local residents and protected area officers or other conservation experts. A bonus of 20% is payable if all contract conditions have been met. This forms the most immediate link between income generation and wildlife conservation. The entire community loses the bonus if one herder illegally kills a snow leopard, ibex or argali sheep;

thus individual incentive is enhanced by peer pressure. Individual producers lose bonuses for other violations of wildlife laws or grazing regulations. The project also offers less tangible

but important conservation linkages such as fostering a positive perception of protected areas, greater appreciation of the international interest in local wildlife, and increased awareness of wildlife issues in general. Working together with the protected area biologists and international snow leopard experts, Irbis Enterprises has collected data regarding the current status of snow leopards and their prey in the areas where they operate. Moreover, they have interviewed hundreds of herders regarding their attitudes toward snow leopards. Using this as baseline

Above: Without Irbis Enterprises, herders sell the wool from their livestock to passing traders in large sacks like these. The value of 1 kg of raw wool is about one dollar. That same kg can be made into finished products which Irbis Enterprises buys for about \$15. This added value creates enormous incentive to participate in the program.

Right: Irbis Enterprises offers training workshops to ensure that everyone who wants to can participate.

Below: Most herders use drop spindles to make yarn.

(courtesy of Irbis Enterprises.)

data they will be able to monitor the impact of the project on people's attitudes as well as on the ecosystem.

Conservation education is included at each step of the Irbis Enterprises process. *lrbis* means snow leopard in Mongolian, so at the first introduction of the project people are aware that this is associated with the big cat. The concept of balance in an ecosystem is explained and they help herders understand the role and value of the predator. Irbis Enterprises' staff work closely with the protected areas on identifying the most important conservation messages and providing the program with the information needed to decide whether or not the bonus should be paid. It is too early to detect any biological or attitudinal impact, but data on both are collected to be able to monitor this in the long term.

Above: Endangered snow leopard. Left: Irbis Enterprises has provided some equipment such as spinning wheels to improve the quality of the finished products and enable herders to increase their income even more. Bottom left: Bayara, program coordinator in Mongolia, with one of the participating herders (herd of sheep in the background). The livestock is vulnerable to snow leopards, but herders can tolerate some losses thanks to the additional income they can make through Irbis Enterprises. Below: Camel wool and yarn at different processing stages. Courtesy of Irbis Enterprises.

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