

# Conservation Increases Crafts Income

Snow Leopard Enterprises, (SLE)

began in 1999 to solve two problems:

how to save endangered snow leopards in Mongolia and create a sustainable income for the local nomadic herders. Herders and snow leopards have cohabited for centuries, along with the cat's natural prey species, mountain goats and sheep. Poverty along with increasing human and livestock populations have put the ecological balance under a lot of pressure, and snow leopards in particular have suffered. Herders, who have been known to kill snow leopards in response to their attacks on livestock, are one of the major threats to these endangered cats. SLE was established as a tool to provide an incentive for local nomadic herders in the mountains of Mongolia to take an active part in wildlife conservation and as a mechanism for herders to increase their household income.

Many herders requested help in getting a better price for the livestock's wool. However, SLE realized that herders could add enormous value to the wool by processing it into a finished product rather than selling it raw. Herders were provided with training and basic knitting equipment to make small knitted items. These were purchased by the program, and sold on the tourist market in Mongolia and to special interest outlets overseas.

A link was made to snow leopard conservation through a bonus system, whereby if no poaching had taken place herders receive an additional 20% over the base price of the product. The program increased awareness among herders and the local community of the value and benefits of wildlife, and reduced the threat to snow leopards and their natural prey. By preserving their natural prey, snow leopards are in turn less likely to attack domestic livestock.

Herders in the snow leopard range in Western Mongolia signed up to participate, and produced about 1,000 items and made over \$3,000 for the communities in the first year and nearly \$5,000 in the second year. Participation also increased from 60 to over 200 herders. This

seemed like a great solution, but after two years

it became apparent that the market for such handcrafted knitted items was

limited. People who were interested in conservation bought the products to be supportive, but this market base could not sustain a longterm business.

In the summer of 2001, a new market was identified

zoo stores-and extensive product development began. Due to the conservation

connection and existing associations with many zoos, this proved to be a sympathetic target market. Up until the present time, SLE had been focusing their line on basic

knitted camel and sheep wool products including hats, mitts, gloves, ear bands and socks, as well as the Kazak style felted hot pads. Their colors were natural in the knitted line and brilliantly colored for the felted line. However, the consistency, functionality and market currency were lacking. There was no brand look to their products, and the quality was a limiting factor to their expanded market entry.

Several zoo store managers were asked to critically review the existing product line and make specific design recommendations. The

goals were to create a completely improved selection of products that would have wide market appeal and give global visibility to SLE. In response to the market-led advice given by the zoo store managers, a new product line was developed. This line introduced color to the knitted crafts using natural dyes, and included more whimsical

items and a much wider line of felt products. The program officer in charge of product development came to the U.S. to receive training, and then passed on the new designs to the herders.

The most important lesson learned by Snow Leopard Enterprises was the value of including the target market in product development. This helped focus the design parameters and develop marketable products, making conservation and income from crafts a viable and sustainable solution. CD

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