

Illegal Trade of Snow Leopards in China: An Overview

By Wen Bo

Historically people in the snow leopard's range in China were able to live with the species in harmony, though hunting for snow leopards occurred occasionally. In recent decades, climate change, habitat loss and destruction of the food chain have posed serious threats to the snow leopard's survival.

A decline in snow leopard numbers is taking place due to the demand by Zoological Parks, and the killing by herdsman of snow leopards. Additionally, a more direct threat comes from trapping and poaching of the animals. These trends have been exacerbated by increased activities of illegal trade of snow leopard parts.

I. Zoo Collection and Illegal Poaching of Snow Leopard

1. The Role of Chinese Zoological Parks

Snow leopards are a rare species in Chinese zoos. Naturally, many zoos want to include them to attract visitors. Most Chinese zoos would seemingly be ready to accept or buy snow leopards if caught alive. For example in March, 1997, a snow leopard was reportedly rescued from a water reservoir and was delivered to Urumqi Zoo, instead of being released to the wild. (1)

International animal exchanges also occurred. In May, 1992, Kyrgyzstan presented Beijing Zoo with two snow leopard cubs. In 1995, they bred two cubs, in 1996 two more, and 1998 three cubs.(2) These were the first successful breedings recorded of captive snow leopards in China. In September 17, 1997, three snow leopards were sent by the Rotterdam Zoo of the Netherlands to Shanghai Zoo, in exchange for leaf monkeys from China. (3)

Zoo breeding has not been very successful in China. Due to the small numbers of the species in captivity, the Chinese media sometimes puts out sensational news stories advertising the search for a mate for a captive snow leopard. This demonstrates the lack of coordination in species conservation programs by zoo authorities.

This lack of successful breeding programs among Chinese zoos has increased the pressure to capture snow leopards in the wild.

2. Trapping by Herdsmen

Herdsman in the snow leopard's range do not historically hunt for snow leopards for profit. Occasionally conflicts between herders and snow leopards come to the point where poisoning of a snow leopard has occurred. The report by Chomolangma Nature Reserve mentions that some herdsman regard the snow leopard as a pest. (4)

In recent years, the hunting by herdsman has increased in Xinjiang due to market demand. In October 2001, Akesu Police arrested a herdsman in Tahelahe for trapping and killing a snow leopard. The herdsman trapped the snow leopard inside Tuomur Mt. Nature Reserve. The herdsman, Baketuer Zhumanshi, was sentenced to ten years imprisonment.(5) Xinjiang Tekesi county's Khazk herdsman caught two snow leopards on January 28 and Feb. 4, 2002. He was arrested on March 17 by the Yili Forestry Police. (6)

This growing trend shows a lack of awareness among herdsman of the importance of snow leopard conservation, wildlife protection laws, and penalties. It also reflects the situation of their troubled economic status.

3. Poached by Poaching Gangs

In Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region, the estimated snow leopard population is between 1000-1500. According to Abulimeiti of Xinjiang Institute of Biology and Geography, 20-30 snow leopards are poached by local hunters each year. (7)

In Qinghai Province, official statistics show that from 1988-1995 sixty snow leopards were reportedly killed. In February 25, 1990, five villagers from Huangzhong County killed 14 snow leopards at Kekexili. According to Qinghai Forestry Bureau, since 1990 more than 100 snow leopards have been poached in the province alone.(8) In August 1996, Maxin County officers arrested two poachers and confiscated a snow leopard belt. (9)

Most poachers in this category do not go for snow leopards alone. Their main target is Tibetan Antelope whose trade has been stimulated by international Shahtoosh trade.(10) It has been reported that the punishment of poachers has not been adequate. In the early 1990s, the punishment was simply confiscation of their weapons and a fine ranging from US \$60 to \$1200.(11)

II. Illegal Trading of Snow Leopard Parts

1. Snow Leopard Pelt

The most commonly traded snow leopard items are pelts. In June 1990, Xining police of Qinghai Province confiscated 40 snow leopard pelts stored at a taxidermist's house.(12) In December 1999, Lianjiang County Court of Fujian Province sentenced three dealers of snow leopard pelts to between 5 & 8 years imprisonment. They were caught on May 23, 1999 selling 17 snow leopard pelts collected from Hohhot, Shanghai and Funzhou. (13)

However, the snow leopard pelt trade is not limited to remote regions. In the summer of 1996, the author identified a snow leopard pelt sold at a fur store near Capital Palace Hotel in Beijing. The shop assistant admitted the 6000RMB bed/sofa cover was from a snow leopard pelt and was not aware that the sale was illegal.

A more recent case was reported by a journalist, Xiao Yang, in November 2001, that two snow leopard cub pelts were being sold in Xining Station Commercial Building. (14)

2. Snow Leopard Bone

After banning the use of tiger bones for traditional Chinese medicines, leopard bones have been used as a substitute. Bones from poached snow leopards have largely ended up with medicine manufacturers through legal or illegal means. As ordinary customers are unlikely to identify snow leopard bones, the public sale is not so common as is pelts.

On August 31, 2000, trader Zhang Fulong was arrested in Shanghai for selling bones from a snow leopard. The bones were collected from Wulan County of the Qinghai province. (15)

3. Snow Leopard Meat

Traditional Chinese medicine affiliates snow leopard meat with the stimulation of human sexual ability.(16) In Tibetan Medicine, snow leopard meat is believed to be able to cure Bad-kan related kidney problems. (17)

Snow leopard meat is also reported to be served as an exotic dish in Sichuan. A news report reveals that in September 2000, a restaurant at Kehuanzhong Road in Chengdu served snow leopard meals at 128 Yuan per dish. The restaurant staff insisted the meat was from a snow leopard caught in the wild. (18)

III. Trading routes of snow leopards

1. Central Asia to Xinjiang

According to conservationists in Kazakstan, each year between 6 and 10 snow leopards are poached in Kazakstan for pelts and body parts, which are being used for traditional Chinese medicines. (19) The value of a snow leopard skin is currently more than 60 times higher than the minimum yearly wage in Kyrgyzstan.(20)

Travellers to Kashgar report that dozens of snow leopards have been sold at Kashgar bazzars, and the origin of many snow leopard pelts are from Central Asia. (21)

2. Qinghai-Tibetan Regions to Aba Prefecture, Sichuan

Songpan County and Jiuzhaigou are two major collection points for snow leopard pelts from Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia and adjacent areas. An investigation conducted by the author in 1998 revealed more than 20 snow leopard pelts sold in Songpan county and 5 in Jiuzhaigou. Songpan is well known as a hub for wildlife traders.

3. Southwest China to Eastern China

A May 1999 case of the confiscation of 17 snow leopard pelts in Lianjiang County of Fujian Province demonstrated a market demand in eastern China for snow leopard pelts. Dealers in eastern China are mostly middle-men who again sell the pelts to Taiwan and Hong Kong. According to a study by Kristin Nowell on wildlife trade in Taiwan, the majority of wildlife skin trade comes from mainland China. In 1989, Kristin identified a taxidermist in Taipei who accepted snow leopard skins. (22)

4. Other Routes

There are certainly other snow leopard trading routes. For example, there has been an increase in poaching since the break up of USSR⁽²³⁾, although whether and how snow leopards are smuggled from Russia Altai and Mongolia to China is still unknown.

IV. Recommendations:

1. A publicity campaign should be started in China to raise awareness on snow leopard and mountain eco-system conservation among local communities in snow leopard ranges. Educational posters, booklets and TV programs should be produced in local languages and distributed widely.
2. An awareness campaign should be organized among Traditional Chinese Medicine manufacturers, pharmacies and customers.
3. Community development projects should be introduced to reduce the incentive for poaching of snow leopards.
4. Wildlife Conservation Law enforcement should be stepped up on snow leopard trading routes, especially in Songpan of Sichuan and Kashgar of Xinjiang.
5. Exchange of information among wildlife management authorities of the snow leopard range countries is needed to stop snow leopard trade.

Endnotes:

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