

BHUTAN WORKSHOP: THIMPHU, LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

***By Dr. Rodney Jackson,
ISLT Conservation Director***

Park Manager Mr. Tashi Wangchuk provided a graphic overview of the Jigme Dorji National Park, which covers a large area in one of the world's ten most significant biodiversity hotspots.

Dr. Perna Gyamtsho, head of the Forestry Division's Policy and Planning section, offered an informative account of pastoralism in the Jigme Dorji National Park. He reported on the widespread belief among herders that blue sheep compete with livestock (primarily yak) for forage, and that some people felt there were too many sheep in some areas. Whether populations are excessive or not cannot be determined until a systematic blue sheep census has been conducted, so the collaborative workshop is opportune.

Still, I found myself wondering if a widespread poisoning program, directed at wolves and Asiatic wild dogs or dhole and undertaken in the late 1980s, may not have upset the natural balance.

Following three days of classroom presentations and group exercises, 15 trainees representing all regions of Bhutan's mountains with potential snow leopard habitat made the three-day trek to Chomolari base camp at the foot of Bhutan's highest peak. Here I worked with Dr. Joseph Fox, a herbivore expert with Norway's University of Tromsø and a member of the ISLT International Advisory Board, to provide hands-on training in how to detect snow leopard and to count the blue sheep that blended into the surrounding rocks and rolling grasslands.

We interviewed local herders and learned that hard winters rather than predation by leopard or wolf were a main threat to their livelihood. Several hoped for greater tourism as an economic resource.

Back in Thimphu, workshop participants reported their findings to senior government officials. All

Rod Jackson and workshop participants prepare a meal before a stone hut and incomparable Bhutanese scenery.

Photo by Dr. Joseph Fox

Imagine a country with vast primeval forests, spectacular birds, verdant alpine pastures dotted with blue sheep, and places at nearly 13,000 feet where tigers and snow leopards actually cross paths. Bhutan is just such a country, a hidden corner of the Himalaya where nature dominates the landscape.

In May ISLT sponsored the 4th SLIMS (Snow Leopard Information Management System) Conservation Training Workshop for Bhutan's park and forest rangers. Attended by 21 Bhutanese forest and wildlife professionals, the workshop was opened by Dasho Dr. Kizang Dorje, Forest Secretary, who stressed the need for a well-trained staff if Bhutan is to remain as Asia's leader in nature conservation - especially in terms of the amount of protected area set aside or forest left intact.

In expressing continued ISLT support for such innovative initiatives, I focused on the role of the snow leopard as a flagship species for conserving high-altitude ecosystems throughout the Himalaya.

(cont. on page 5)

Snow Line - 1997

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agreed that current knowledge of the snow leopard's status and -- distribution in Bhutan is limited and that more field surveys are urgently needed.

The list of protected areas in Bhutan known or suspected to contain snow leopards are:

Jigme Dorji National Park (4,350 km²) - presence confirmed.

Torsa Strict Nature Reserve (650 km²) - status unknown, but presence is likely.

Kulongchhu Wildlife Sanctuary (1,184 km²) - status unknown, but presence is likely.

Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (755 km²) - status unknown, but likely to occur.

Thrumshingla National Park (890 km²) - status unknown.

Black Mountain National Park (1,730 km²) - potential habitat present, but presence is unlikely due to isolation from the main Himalayan distributional range of the species.

The total amount of potential snow leopard habitat is estimated

roughly at 7 to 10,000 km²; assuming a density of one cat per 100 km², there would be about 100 snow leopards in Bhutan. However, this is a very crude estimate and ground surveys to confirm presence or absence, followed by relative abundance transects, are urgently needed.

Principal threats to the species are thought to be incidental poaching and retributive killing by herdsman in the face of livestock depredation -- although participants said that there was no evidence to suggest much trade in pelts or bones, as may be the case for tiger.

Clearly, these enthusiastic forest rangers have a daunting task given the remote habitat and the difficulty of detecting a snow leopard scrape or pugmark where vegetation is lush and rainfall prodigious.

Although we are at the beginning of our partnership with WWFBhutan and the Nature Conservation Section of His Majesty's Government of Bhutan, I have no

doubt that the snow leopard is in secure hands there. Indeed, it is a great privilege to have visited Bhutan and conducted the first SLIMS training workshop there, made possible in large part through a grant from the Leonard X. Bosack and Bette M. Kruger Foundation.

The International Snow Leopard Trust extends its deep appreciation to WWF-Bhutan and the Nature Conservation Section of the Forestry Division, Government of Bhutan, for inviting us to Bhutan.