

Markets for Snow Leopard Products

Kristin Nowell

"Untamed...the Snow Leopard, provocatively dangerous. A mankiller. Born free in the wild whiteness of the high Himalayas only to be snared as part of the captivating new fur collection...styled and shaped in a one-of-a-kindness to bring out the animal instinct in you" (Conway 1968).

In the late 1960s, when this advertisement for a snow leopard fur coat originally appeared, exotic cat coats were all the rage in Western fashion. Norman Myers (1973) estimated that international trade in spotted cats' skins for this market was valued at \$30 million a year. This was the culmination of a very long human tradition of wearing items of cat skin as symbolic expressions of status and power.

But legal international trade in snow leopard skins ended in the early 1970s. The International Fur Trade Federation recommended to its members a voluntary moratorium on snow leopard skins in 1971. In 1975 the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) entered into force, and since then there has been no reported international trade in snow leopard skins (Wildlife Trade Monitoring Centre, Cambridge; unpubl. data). International commercial trade in snow leopard skins is prohibited by the species listing on CITES Appendix I.

There is still some illegal trade in snow leopard fur coats. Snow leopard coats have been found by investigators for sale in Kathmandu, Nepal and in Beijing, China (van Gruisen and Sinclair 1992, Johnson and Yu 1996). Snow leopard coats were not found by TRAFFIC investigators in Greece, one of few European markets where spotted cat fur coats are still sold openly (and illegally) (de Meulenaer and Gray 1992).

If the snow leopard was formerly traded most frequently for its skins for the women's fashion fur market, two other markets have now taken prominence. Skins are now sold as household novelties. This type of trade is widespread, although it is impossible to even begin to guess at trade volume. Customers for a snow leopard skin live all over the world, and Asian countries have developed undercover markets which allow an illegal skin from the Himalaya, for example, to make its way to a department store in Tianjin, an industrial city all the way across China on the east coast. A store manager there told investigators that several wealthy customers from northeast and east China had previously purchased skins to hang on their walls (Johnson and Yu 1996). Snow leopard skin mounts (on felt backing) have been seen for sale, and in peoples' houses, throughout East Asia as well as the central Asian republics (Low 1991, Anon. 1996, TRAFFIC Network unpubl.), and American and European Customs still seize the occasional skin from a would-be tourist importer.

The other major market today is for snow leopard bone; to be used, like tiger bone, in traditional Chinese medicine to alleviate symptoms of rheumatism and related ailments (Mills and Jackson 1994). Both the skin and the bones of a snow leopard can be dried and preserved, and carried a long distance for trade. It is possible that dried snow

leopard penis is also traded, but most so-called tiger penis seen by investigators in trade is really water buffalo, so it is uncertain to what degree there is an added incentive to a poacher from the value of the cat's sexual organs.

In fact, much of the tiger bone seen in trade is also fake. Faking valuable traditional medicines is quite an art form in China, to the extent that the pharmacists have published an encyclopedia, with color photographs, illustrating how to distinguish real and fake (i.e., pig gall bladder from bear gall bladder) (Lin and Chen 1988).

Medicines manufactured in China labelled as containing tiger bone were tested by the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Wildlife Forensics Laboratory, and the lab found that they contained no bone material at all (E. Espinoza pers. comm.), although they did contain mercury and arsenic! Many visitors to China have seen street peddlers selling various dried animal parts as novelties, including fake tiger lower legs, made from cowbone, dried ligaments, fur scraps painted orange and black, and glued-on dog claws. These legs have even fooled Chinese pharmacists. I found one for sale in a Taipei pharmacy in 1992. It had been shrinkwrapped with plastic and set out proudly on display (at a time when Taipei pharmacists could still get away with it, before highly publicized trade bans the next year and the advent of stickers saying "We don't trade tiger bone or rhinoceros horn here!" in display windows formerly featuring rhino horn and tiger skulls). The successful Taipei pharmacist was dismayed to learn that he had paid apparently quite a high price for a fake.

The conservation community knows little about the medicinal market for big cat bones, although our knowledge is improving as we work more closely with practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine. The trade is more underground than it used to be, given recent publicity around the tiger and new trade bans, and it is difficult to determine how much trade has slowed, or if it continues at higher-than-ever black market prices. We are not even certain that the consumer market for real tiger bone, or real snow leopard bone, can be easily identified as a discrete market segment with similar purchase motivation. Customers willing to evade trade bans and pay extra for medicines containing real bone could be found in major Asian communities all over the world. And because of the publicity, it is likely that a number of smuggler types normally unconnected with the medicinal trade are buying bone from local hunters in the hopes of eventually selling it in the cities at high profit.

It is likely that the skin and bones of most snow leopards living close to villages which are killed as problem animals eventually find their way to a Chinese-connected wildlife products middleman trader. Likewise, there are hunters throughout the snow leopard's range who make their living by trapping and shooting wild animals for these traders, and some of these hunters catch snow leopards by chance or by intent. It is important to find out to what degree the existing markets serve as an incentive for hunters to try to hunt snow leopards commercially. Trade in snow leopard skins has been widely reported in the Central Asian republics (Koshkarev 1994, Loginov and Loginov 1995, Anon. 1996); it is uncertain if a trade channel has yet been established with China for bone.

Snow leopards are protected from hunting essentially throughout their range (Nowell and Jackson 1996), but given the remote nature of the species' habitat, enforcement is difficult. In the urban markets, where skins and bones eventually wind up, trade goes on with varying degrees of official ignorance, disregard, or outright collusion.

Action to protect snow leopards from potentially unsustainable levels of commercial hunting should take place on two levels. The first involves encouraging better enforcement of protective measures. Alternative sources of income need to be found for rural hunters who are under economic pressure to hunt snow leopards (some are acting to protect valuable livestock). Also, in urban areas, officials charged with enforcement of trade bans may need resources and training in order to act more effectively.

The second involves consumer education, but, as has been pointed out with regard to the tiger bone market, virtually nothing is known of the demographics of tiger product use (Nowell and Jackson 1996, Hemley and Bolze 1996). In order to employ effective consumer messages, it is essential to identify user groups and understand the motivations behind their use of these products. There needs to be much more research in these areas, which is difficult to do because trade is largely underground. Research should be done by native speakers familiar with local culture and with an understanding of socioeconomics.

In general, there should be much greater effort on the part of international conservation organizations to build up the profile, capabilities and resources of conservation groups indigenous to the areas where snow leopards live and where they are consumed.