

SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVANCY

Dedicated to researching and demonstrating innovative grassroots measures which lead local people to become effective stewards of the endangered snow leopard, its prey and its habitat

ANNUAL REPORT, 2001



Camera trap photograph of a wild snow leopard in Hemis National Park

This report outlines the conservation and education actions undertaken in 2001 by the Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) toward preserving the endangered snow leopard, which is found in the mountains of twelve Central Asian countries. We augmented our program in Ladakh, India and launched new projects in Nepal and Tibet. We also laid the ground work for new community-based snow leopard conservation initiatives in Nepal's former Kingdom of Mustang, and in Manang, the country's most frequented trekking region after Mt. Everest.

The SLC was established in June 2000, with an innovative, grassroots approach that goes to the heart of a central issue in preserving the species: killing of snow leopards by shepherds in retaliation for livestock depredation. Mountain people depend upon yak, cattle, sheep and goats for meat, dairy products and wool. With wild prey being depleted from poaching, snow leopards are increasingly turning to livestock corralled within poorly constructed—and thus easily entered—stone pens. Fifty or more goats and sheep may be lost in a single night, for the predator's natural instinct is to kill all that cannot escape. Snow leopards may be easily stoned to death as they cower in a corner of the corral, or after coming to poisoned carcasses. We help villagers rebuild their pens so snow leopards cannot get in. Each set of protected nighttime pens ensures five or more snow leopards can live out their lives among the rocky crags.

Working with in-country partners and fostering community-based nature stewardship, SLC assists villagers in gaining the necessary skills and knowledge for improving their livelihoods, while also protecting snow leopards and other mountain biodiversity. All affected persons and institutions, from grandmothers and children to the local wildlife department, play a role in devising sustainable solutions for problems like that just described. Grass-roots participation and ownership better enables communities to co-exist with large predators which are usually perceived negatively.

We also work to improve overall animal husbandry practices, along with increasing environmental and conservation awareness using local language posters or children's books that convey the basic principles of the high mountain food web, and the snow leopard's place in it. SLC's collaboration with organizations like The Mountain Institute and the International Snow Leopard Trust is a highly effective way of stretching donor dollars and avoiding duplication of effort.

A glance at our financial report reveals the remarkably low administrative cost of achieving the goals we set for 2001. Apart from our policy of working through close local partnerships, all costs of fundraising for SLC, along with a substantial portion of administration, are underwritten by one of our Visionary donors. We invite you to join with us in protecting the endangered snow leopard, its prey and habitat by building the capacity of local people living in Central Asia's mountains to protect their valuable natural heritage.

FIELD REPORT

LADAKH

Jigmet Dadool is our new Ladakh Program Assistant and Leh Office Manager. He supervises the activities of local villagers under the direction of Rinchen Wangchuk. Jigmet has worked with three film productions as field technical assistant, has excellent wildlife spotting skills, and speaks four languages. His past experience as a trekking guide will also be very helpful to the program. Dorje Stanzin is our new social mobilizer or “Village Steward,” to facilitate corral predator-proofing and wildlife monitoring in Skyu-Kaya villages. Rinchen and his team are currently searching for women Village Stewards to help facilitate tourism and conservation activities.

January: Women’s Group Training for Improved Tourist Revenue Capture



Under Rinchen’s direction, chef Sonam Stanzin gave a week-long training in cooking for tourists to nine women and one man from Rumbak and Yurutse villages. Emphasis was placed on basic hygiene, simple meals using traditional foods, and café operations. Participants discussed the need for alternate cooking fuels, such as natural gas and kerosene, instead of firewood or yak dung, and the sale of pressure boiled water to minimize use of plastic mineral water bottles, which end up littering the landscape. The importance of a garbage management plan was highlighted.

January-March: Snow Leopard Monitoring

The first in-depth documentary on snow leopards is being produced in Ladakh by Hugh Miles (whose credits include *Tigers of Kanba*, 1999, an award-winning National Geographic special). Rodney is providing scientific support, and Rinchen is providing logistical and technical assistance to camera-man Mitchell Kelly. Filming started in January, and will continue over the next two years. Several snow leopards were filmed via three remotely-triggered video cameras.

Camera traps also provide us with excellent opportunities for data collection. In addition to the videos, four still cameras were set up to monitor the snow leopard population. These cameras enable us to identify individuals. One cat visited the still cameras, and the videos had a total of seven visits (five snow leopards, one fox and one wild dog). The film shows snow leopards face-rubbing, scent-spraying, and exhibiting a scent-triggered response known as *flehmen* (lip-curl with open mouth and bared canines). This is the first time any of these behaviors have been photographed in the wild. One male almost does a somersault in its eagerness to scent-spray! Two short clips of the video are posted on our website.

April: Village Meetings and Action Planning

Community-based tourism specialist Renzino Lepcha, from our partners The Mountain Institute (TMI), visited Ladakh to assist SLC in developing tourism initiatives and to train our staff in the use of Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA). Trainings were conducted as part of actual village planning meetings. The meetings opened with introductions of the participants and a review of the objectives and SLC’s design criteria. Villagers then reviewed the status of their previous activities, and identified elements on which they wished to follow-up.



The Snow Leopard Conservancy operates within CAT-Cat Action Treasury, an IRS-certified non-profit 501(c) (3) public charity for the conservation of wild cats in their natural habitats. CAT supports projects which have been endorsed as high priority by the World Conservation Union’s Cat Specialist Group.

In Rumbak we met with twelve women representing the nine households of the village to follow-up on the January training. Participants outlined trends over the past twenty years. They agreed that snowfall has declined since 1980, as indicated by the earlier melting and reduced size of the local glaciers. Low moisture is of great concern with respect to agriculture and reduced rangeland productivity. They said the last year with good precipitation was 1994. Villagers were not aware of the cause for this trend, so the team briefly introduced Global Warming. Participants also agreed that tourist numbers have increased noticeably in recent years. All the women expressed their wish that more trekkers would visit, as tourism is a good source of supplemental income. Participants attributed the increase in blue sheep numbers to a reduction in hunters from outside, especially army personnel.

An initial Tourism Enhancement Action Plan was developed, which included creation of a standardized menu (with standardized prices) using more locally available foods, and printing of the menus in English and Ladakhi. That way, tourists can understand what they're ordering, and local people will not have to remember unfamiliar English words. Villagers decided to build a toilet and small store-room at the community-owned campsite, as well as installing sign-boards informing tourists of available facilities. This was accomplished in time for the summer's trekking season.



Meetings were also held at the twin settlements of Skyu-Kaya, to follow up on their request for corral predator-proofing, at a pasture used by all twenty-six households. Following an overview of APPA, the participants listed what they perceive as the good attributes of their area: spectacular mountain scenery, abundant wildlife, good water supplies, vibrant festivals and rituals (including archery), a monastery, a strong Amchi (traditional healer), and the Kangyache Glacier, home to the villagers' mountain spirits. They saw themselves as being self-sufficient in terms of fuelwood, timber, barley, fruit and vegetables.

In visualizing their area's future, they wished for increased tourism and capacity to capture its benefits (including offering cultural shows), as well as more predator-proof corrals. Some expressed concern over possible negative impacts of increased tourism, i.e. more horses—which have to be fed over the nine winter months when no tourists visit—on their pastures. One man reported that his new horse, worth Rs 25,000, had already been killed by a snow leopard. The group launched into a tirade over the Wildlife Department's ineffective compensation scheme, with claims taking several years to settle and the amount “hardly covering the cost of traveling to Leh to file the claim and collect the money.” We used this energy to engage the villagers in ranking the major reasons for livestock losses. They were identified, in order, as snow leopard, wolf, fox, disease and bad weather. An Action Plan was developed for corral predator-proofing and tourism development. The resulting contract outlined the project's objectives, the specific responsibilities of each party, success indicators, and the grant conditions.

May: Community-based Ecotourism (CBT) Development

SLC, The Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), and TMI sponsored a three-day workshop in Leh. Its purpose was to increase awareness of community-based ecotourism, and to explore how this could contribute to conservation and economic development in rural Ladakh. Over seventy participants—village representatives, local entrepreneurs, local government departments, political leaders, community organizations, NGOs and the private commercial sector—expressed a desire to develop tourism in ways that maintain Ladakh's unique balance of cultural, social and environmental heritage. The workshop resulted in a series of Action Plans, translated into Ladakhi and distributed to local communities, for organizing Community-Based Tourism in Ladakh, including forming a Pony Union and regulating grazing areas; training and access to financing; and developing “Village Homestays.” Starting in 2001, a basic fee of U.S. \$10 will be collected from foreign visitors to Ladakh (\$20 for those wishing to visit restricted areas). This money will be deposited into a revolving fund aimed at protecting the environment, supporting national monuments, and local education. See our web site for details.

June-September: Tourism Visitor Survey

While the nationalities of roughly five thousand visitors are recorded each year by Hemis Park staff, little else is known about them. Accordingly SLC, in collaboration with LEDeG and local travel agents, conducted a visitor survey during the peak trekking seasons. Questions were aimed at learning why visitors choose Ladakh, how they organize their trek (through

local or outside agents), what they paid, what their expectations were in regard to cultural experiences, nature viewing, food, lodging, trekking and guiding services. We were also interested in knowing the average duration of a visit, daily cost, other sites visited, and the visitors' satisfaction. They were asked to rank existing services such as food, hygiene and sanitation, campsite maintenance, garbage management, and pack horse rental, and to recommend what additional facilities and services they would like to see. The report is posted on our website.

July: Corral Predator-Proofing

Summer corrals in Skyu-Kaya's Lilangtse pasture were predator-proofed. The villagers hired outside laborers to help with construction, as most local men were away on jobs with trekking companies. Each household contributed half the price of a goat toward covering the laborer's wages. SLC provided supervisory support and wire mesh, doors and roofing materials.



Environmental Education

SLC's educational activities are centered around the simplest of teaching tools: books about snow leopards and their habitat for young readers in the range countries; colorful posters and group educational activities keyed to them. Rather than "reinventing the wheel," we adapt activities developed by Peace Corps Volunteers using locally available materials.



In Ladakh, we have partnered with the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL). SECMOL was founded in 1988 by returning university students dedicated to preserving and strengthening the cultural heritage, wisdom, and unique identity of the Ladakhi people. They created *Operation New Hope* in 1994—a multi-agency collaboration aimed at reforming Ladakh's education system. Teachers and headmasters are given special trainings at the SECMOL campus outside Leh. New primary school textbooks are produced that reflect traditional Ladakhi life. The Ladakhi version of SLC's poster *Good Livestock Husbandry is Good for Snow Leopards* is being used in this program, along with a Ladakhi adaptation of *Pasang and the Sheep Thief* (see Nepal program).

NEPAL

September: Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project

The former kingdom of Mustang lies along Nepal's northern border. Since it was founded around the 8th Century, it has been more closely allied to Western Tibet. The area remained little changed until the mid-1990s, when it was opened for foreign tourists. To reach the walled city of Lo Manthang, established in 1380, trekkers must cross the main Himalayan range, or make their way into the upper reaches of the Kali Ghandaki gorge, which is deeper than the Grand Canyon. Along with Manang District to the south (see the education section below), Mustang is part of the Annapurna Conservation Area. As Nepal's largest conservation area, it supports important habitat for snow leopards.



Rod was asked by the United Nations Development Program to help train project staff in biodiversity and rangeland assessment, and to introduce SLC's process for reducing livestock depredation and fostering local stewardship of the area's wildlife. His team partner was Camille Richard, a rangeland ecologist from ICIMOD, a regional "think-tank" based in Kathmandu.

After a wild half-hour flight, the plane slipped between the last of the twenty-six thousand-foot peaks and landed at Jomsom. A prosperous mountain village lying at seven thousand feet, Jomsom has exchanged its trade in salt for the even more lucrative business of accommodating tourists.

October: Ladakh Program Planning

After Nepal, Rod traveled back to Ladakh to work with Rinchen, Jigmet and Dorje, including identifying SLC's 2002 program priorities and helping establish the Ladakh office. Here's what a Kaya-Skyu shepherd had to say about his village's new livestock pen:

In the late evening, after our sheep and goats had spent the day grazing, we herded them into the new pen, locked the door and walked the two miles to our home. When we returned in the morning, there were tracks of a snow leopard all around the pen. This happened two nights in a row, but we lost none of our animals. As Buddhists, we are very happy, for the sake of our livestock, and for the snow leopard who might now go back to hunting blue sheep. Also we are very happy because now we shepherds no longer have to lie awake on the cold ground next to the pen. We can go home and get a good night's sleep.

Environmental Education



Snow Queen, the third title in our collaborative program with publishers Ramailo Kitaab on a snow leopard conservation series, has now been released. *My Grandmother Says* introduces beginning readers to snow leopards and the other animals of the high mountain ecosystem, while *Pasang and the Sheep Thief* tells a more complicated story. These books, and the Nepali version of the SLC/TMI poster *Good Livestock Management is Good for Snow Leopards* were used in our education projects described below. Altogether, Ramailo Kitaab has distributed 5,102 copies of the three books.

Manang: The District of Manang supports important snow leopard habitat within the Annapurna Conservation Area. ACAP has established a special Snow Leopard Conservation Committee and a small fund to indirectly compensate local herders and to encourage them to protect the cat. SLC has now teamed with ACAP, WWF-Nepal and the local communities to develop measures to address this issue. Since most sheep and goats are preyed upon while grazing on the open range, we aim to improve guarding practices, and to strengthen community-based tourism in the area. Manang is Nepal's most heavily trekked area, with some twenty thousand-plus visitors each year. Local guide training, tea-house and lodge management skills training will help local people capture more tourist revenue along a new "offshoot" corridor.

Subas Dhakal, Conservation Program Manager for Wildlife-Environment Nepal (W-E Nepal), is heading up the other collaborative project in the Manang District. WE-Nepal is a Nepali non-profit organization dedicated to educating Nepalese citizens about biodiversity conservation. Subas holds a B.S. in wildlife conservation and management. He also serves as an editor of *The Wildlife*, a magazine about Nepal's Wildlife and Environment.

Between June and October 2001, WE-Nepal conducted the first Snow Leopard Awareness and Education Camp. Ten villages participated, along with the local Conservation Area Management and Village Development Committees, ACAP staff, principals from seven schools, and representatives of the Department of Forestry. Educational materials for the camps included a booklet of facts, readers, and posters. Camp activities for students included an art contest and quiz competition. Ecology clubs, "Friends of the Snow Leopard" were formed in seven schools, with 63 participating students and 14 teachers. After the camp, scores on a basic questionnaire about the snow leopard and its conservation issues rose from 39% to 99%.



From the camps, depredation of livestock by snow leopards emerged as the major conservation issue, and local people believe that a proper compensation program is needed. WE-Nepal recommended in their preliminary report that a discussion session be conducted at a future camp on the drawbacks of compensation programs in terms of sustainability and difficulty of administering, and the benefits of better livestock husbandry and better-constructed pens. Local residents claimed that poaching of snow leopard in Manang is limited by Buddhist beliefs. But they added that "businessmen"

from India engage in trafficking of pelts, which can be bought for up to US\$350 and sold in Calcutta for up to \$4,000. This illegal trade is relatively easy as there is no checking of loads on pack animals. WE-Nepal noted in their report that the loads of pack animals should be checked at police check posts, and more severe penalties imposed for those caught. Currently, fines for trade in endangered species range from \$700 to \$1400, and jail time ranges from 5 to 15 years; however to our knowledge, no case involving trade in snow leopard or their parts has ever been tried in the Nepalese courts.

Jr Rangers, Dolpa District, Nepal

Nagendra Budhathoki is a specialist in environmental education, with experience in Nepal and the U.S. He created the Jr. Rangers environmental education curriculum for primary school children in Nepal's Dolpa District, under a joint US-Nepalese government program which has now ended. Shey Phoksundo National Park, most of which lies in Dolpa, supports a good population of snow leopards and their prey. Nagendra is overseeing a revamped Jr. Rangers program under SLC's sponsorship. Also partnering with SLC in this effort is a local non-profit, DESERT working with teachers to bring conservation education into the schools.



The program begins with a description of the U.S. Jr. Rangers, on which the Dolpa program is modeled, and an overview of SLC's and DESERT's role. Group activities follow, to create an atmosphere of cooperation, teamwork, trust, communication, problem solving, and planning. Over the school year, students locate Shey Phoksundo National Park on Nepal's map; learn what a national park is and why we need them, calculate the percentage of Nepal's total land that is officially protected, etc. SLC's *livestock husbandry poster*, the *Ramailo Kitaab books*, and group activities are used to teach students about the animals found in the park. Two classroom sessions are devoted entirely to the cats; one on the facts, another entitled "Snow Leopards in Danger!" which covers the threats faced by the cats, how they are being protected and how kids can help. Teachers have been requested to do a minimum of three chapters throughout the year.



TIBET

SLC staff have worked in southern Tibet since the early 1990's, focusing on wildlife status surveys, training and capacity building in the Qomolangma (pronounced Chomo langma) National Nature Preserve (QNNP), a 13,514 sq. mi. area centered on Mt. Everest. In June Rodney assisted Dr. Lhakpa Sherpa of TMI's Qomolangma Conservation Project in conducting a seven-day park management training workshop for staff from the Park Management Bureau offices. Special attention was given to the need for integrated ecosystem management, people-wildlife conflict resolution and the protection of rare species like snow leopard. Future activities will center around corral predator-proofing.

Other Activities:

As a Core Member of the IUCN-sponsored Cat Specialist Group, Rodney attended its special meeting in Switzerland, to help define wild cat conservation priorities over the next few years. In August, he attended the 8th International Theriological Congress in South Africa, and presented a paper on the SLC and its unique approach to community-based conservation at a symposium titled, "People and Predators." In October, Rodney and Rinchen's paper presented at the Defender's of Wildlife *Carnivores 2000* Conference was published in the *Endangered Species Update*, a bulletin distributed by the University of Michigan. Both articles are posted on our web-site. In November Rinchen attended a national workshop on Community Conserved Areas, held in Bhopal, India.

In the summer Rinchen and Jigmet conducted a survey of the endangered Tibetan antelope (*chiru*) in the remote Changtang. They observed over one hundred animals, the largest number recorded to date. Recommendations for their protection are being forwarded to the Wildlife Dept. and the Army.

A three day trek by pony took Rod and Camille over three 14,000-ft passes, and across an almost treeless barren landscape, resembling Canyonlands National Park in the U.S. During most afternoons a 40-plus mph wind howled across the lower gorge. Being in the rain shadow of the Himalaya, Mustang gets much less moisture than the rest of Nepal. There are endless expanses of yellow and grey rolling hills eroded by wind and water, great red fluted cliffs of tiny round stones cemented together by mud, and small verdant villages several hours' ride apart. In the distance they appeared almost as mirages, but were beautiful with yellowish red fields of buckwheat and barley in the process of being harvested by the *Lobas* (people of Lo).

After a classroom session in Lo Manthang, the group headed for the Raja's summer pastures (there is still a figurehead King), to provide the eight trainees with practical experience in characterizing the alpine rangelands. APPA and other modern scientific methods, along with traditional knowledge, helped the group gain a regional overview. From meetings with herders, the economic importance of livestock quickly became apparent along with environmentally negative effects resulting from the border closure that happened fifteen years







ago. Forage is scarce because more livestock is concentrated around villages, and because of the lost access to traditional winter pastures in Tibet. During the 1970s Mustang harbored Tibetans fighting for independence from China, and their depletion of blue sheep forced snow leopards to depend on livestock. Working with village representatives and rangers



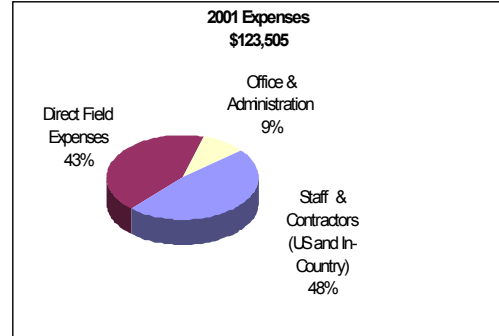
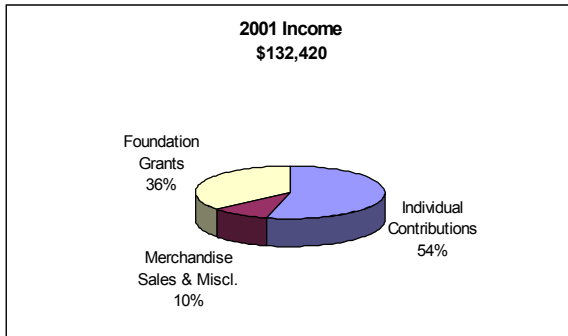
from the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), the group came up with a plan of action to address the increasing levels of people-wildlife conflict and environmental degradation. The plan, which has the Raja's full support, promotes sustainable land stewardship in ways that preserve local culture, tradition and life-giving values.

Those activities gave Rod the opportunity to lay the groundwork for a new SLC program, in collaboration with ACAP and our other partner, the American Himalayan Foundation. Chhering Rinjin is a young *Loba* with the passion and personality to motivate even the most reticent herder. We are contracting with him to gather baseline information on livestock depredation in preparation for a major community action workshop in June 2002. At that time we will introduce the kind of corral predator-proofing and grass-roots planning that has proven so effective in Ladakh for protecting snow leopards.

The Snow Leopard Conservancy aims to

-  *Reduce livestock depredation by predator-proofing corrals, educating herders and improving animal husbandry practices*
-  *Closely link snow leopard and biodiversity conservation with initiatives aimed at improving household incomes in environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically viable ways*
-  *Increase environmental awareness and understanding of the fragile mountain ecosystem, especially among rural communities and decision-makers through innovative, cost-effective outreach initiatives*
-  *Conduct non-invasive baseline research on snow leopards, their prey and habitat, blending scientific information with local knowledge*

FINANCES



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PROGRAM PARTNERS

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VOLUNTEERS

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