

Humla Villagers Agree to Protect Snow Leopards



In September 2003, the Snow Leopard Conservancy and the Nepal Trust achieved a major victory. Three villages in Humla, one of the most important leopard habitats in Nepal, participated in SLC-sponsored planning sessions to discuss conflict between village livestock and snow leopards, and agreed to protect the endangered cats. Key to the accomplishment was the participatory dialog that SLC partners Jigme Lama and Wendy Lama used with villagers. The community concluded that if they improved livestock guarding practices and covered unprotected open windows in the winter stables with wire mesh, the snow leopards could not threaten their livestock. SLC agreed to provide wire mesh to protect the stables, and the villagers agreed to install and maintain it.

Snow leopards had been killed in retaliation for livestock predation as recently as that past winter in Humla, so these new contracts were an important victory for the cats. The victory also highlights the importance of trusted local partners, such as the Nepal Trust, and the value of an approach that fully involves the community from the beginning in conservation planning and problem-solving. The villagers signed a contract further agreeing to:



- *stop community members from killing or attempting to kill snow leopards;
- *oversee the dismantling of all snow leopard traps and prevent any from being built;
- *record all reported sightings of snow leopards;
- *record all livestock losses and attacks by snow leopard practice the best possible livestock guarding techniques.

Update: Unfortunately, Nepal's growing Maoist insurgency terminated development and conservation activities, even in the remote district of Humla. Youths fled to India or Kathmandu to avoid forced conscriptions, the number of tourists plummeted due to the extortion-prone tendency of insurgents, and the influence of the government waned significantly. Although a few projects like the Dutch-supported tourism initiative have endured, we were unable to continue our partnership with Jigme Lama and the Nepal Trust for lack of on-the-ground staff.

In addition, the insurgents poached wildlife, selling pelts and bones of large cats to China as a means of financing their movement. In Dolpo, they harvested *Yarshagumba*, (also known as "Himalayan Viagra"), a highly prized medicinal and commercial product sold in China that is far more valuable in terms of weight than gold.

Its scientific name, *Cordyceps sinensis* literally means summer plant and winter insect. Before the rainy season starts, the spores of this fungus settle on caterpillars that live just underground; drawing on the cells of the insect, the fungus grows rapid, killing the caterpillar. This rare and unique herb is found in meadows above 3,500 meters (11,483 feet) in the Himalaya, and now constitutes the income mainstay for the people in Dolpo and upper Humla.



For further insights into the impact of the Maoist conflict on Nepal's wildlife, see the book by Mangal Man Sakya of Wildlife Watch Group, with co-author Anil Chitrakar, "Cost of Conflict in Nepal's Conservation efforts," and visit the website www.citesnepal.org

As of this writing (2011), Humla and adjacent areas in India and Tibet are receiving increased attention as part of the ICI-MOD sponsored *Kailas Sacred Landscape* initiative, with whom we expect to partner this spring. For details, visit <http://www.icimod.org/?q=291>