



Hushey Villagers Honored for Snow Leopard Conservation Action

In January 2004, residents of Hushey, a remote village in northern Pakistan's Baltistan region, were dismayed to find a snow leopard in one of their livestock pens. It had killed some eighteen goats and sheep, and was unable to find its way out of the small opening through which it had entered the pen. This was the third major attack on livestock in as many years, and a disaster for the owners of the sheep and goats.

Life is harsh enough for Hushey's thousand or so residents without these escalating depredations. The village lies at an elevation of 10,000 feet, 90 miles east of Skardu, Baltistan's administrative center. Hushey itself and the upper valleys, which rise higher than 25,000 feet, are located either within the boundaries of the Central Karakoram National Park or its buffer zone. There are an estimated 10 to 13 snow leopards here, and perhaps between 1,500 and 3,000 ibex, the snow leopard's main wild prey in northern Pakistan. The people live by farming and herding, and earn small amounts of cash from a tourism industry that was never large but has plunged since September 11, 2001. The average annual household income is between \$300 and \$400. The eighteen dead sheep and goats were worth between \$618 and \$1,352.

Yet, instead of quietly killing the snow leopard – which would until recently have been the likely response, and which is illegal in Pakistan – the villagers made the decision to set it free. This event was detailed in an e-mail we received in January 2004, from a representative of IUCN-Pakistan, who was called to Hushey to witness the release.

Herders in Hushey have distinctive livestock enclosures, called xalas (the Balti word for structures in summer pastures used by people or by animals for nighttime shelter). The xalas is low-roofed, usually with several small rooms, each with its own walls, ceiling and doorway. Sometimes doors are missing or in disrepair. Every pasture has at least three xalas; some have dozens. As few as three or four animals or as many as two dozen can fit into one xalas.

In Hushey, women are the shepherds, staying in pasture settlements during the season. They also have responsibilities in the village. They make butter in the pastures, but cannot store it there. Every couple of days, one of them must carry the butter back to the village. They also carry large firewood loads down, and bring food for themselves back up to the pastures every few days. The pastures lie between three and seven miles from the village. Village fields are watered communally, and women have to take part if no male household member is present. There is a labor shortage because the men go outside for work and children stay in the village to study (thus fewer go to the pastures).

The Hushey community's willingness to set free a snow leopard that they could easily have killed demonstrates a major shift in attitude, from wishing to eliminate a predator from their environment, to hoping that co-existence can be possible. Perhaps the words of one villager speak best to this change of heart: Snow leopards are a noble representative of true wildlife... just like in the jungle where the tiger is king, here, the snow leopard is king of the mountains... it captures the spirit of the wild.