

THE HINDU

SURVEY OF THE ENVIRONMENT 2004



LADAKH'S SNOW LEOPARD

A fighting chance

Rinchen Wangchuk outlines how community-based conservation efforts can help local villagers and the elusive mountain cat live in peaceful co-existence.

It was a frosty November morning. I sat huddled with a group of travel agents outside the *Mani* (large prayer wheel) in Rumbak village. Rumbak was the first village in Ladakh's Hemis National Park to offer traditional home stays to foreign and domestic tourists. The travel agents from the nearby capital of Leh, had gathered with the villagers and Snow Leopard Conservancy staff to evaluate the community-based tourism programme, following the summer season.

Inviting local participation

Some 4,000 tourists trek through the park each year, with little or no benefit to the local communities. But over the past two years, villagers — especially the women — worked hard to get a share in the income from tourism.

And their efforts paid off! Each family had earned about Rs. 4,000 in the last season (2003); an amount that meant a significant difference in the lives of some. Padma Dolma said, "The income from the home stays enabled me to send my daughter to a good school in Shey village — something I would have not dreamed of about a year ago." Similarly, Deskit from Hemis-Shukpachen village said that the money that they earned was a

direct income to the women at home, which enabled them to provide additional support to their family and children.

In 2002, the Snow Leopard Conservancy, in collaboration with Paris-based UNESCO and the U.S.-based The Mountain Institute, had invited village participation in developing eco-friendly alternative livelihoods requiring minimal outside investment, linked to conservation action. The Hemis National Park is home to the elusive snow leopard, whose numbers are declining globally across the cats vast, 12-nation range, partly due to poaching for its beautiful fur. Although the communities living within Hemis National Park do not hunt it for meat or its fur, there has been a tendency to kill the snow leopard in retaliation for the killing of domestic livestock. In addition, the wolf is also sometimes killed in retaliation when it attacks domestic livestock.

The community-based tourism activities in these villages were conceived as a result of a planning process where villagers were asked to "discover" their community strengths, local resources and skills. Based on their answers, they were then asked to "dream" short-term and long-term development scenarios if necessary resources were mobilised and



Rinchen Wangchuk

Around 4000 tourists visit the Park every year



Rumbak, Ladakh

Traditional home stays are a strong cultural experience for domestic and international visitors

the community acted together. Finally a plan was developed for "design" and "delivery" with minimal support from outside. In these workshops, traditional home stays emerged as a viable business that the women could conduct while continuing their agricultural activities.

The Snow Leopard Conservancy offers technical support and/or shares the cost of activities based upon certain conditions being met by the village. These conditions clearly state that all activities must be linked to wildlife conservation; that there must be no killing of wolf pups and no retaliatory killing of snow leopards, and that 10 per cent of the profit from the tourism activities must go into a village conservation fund.

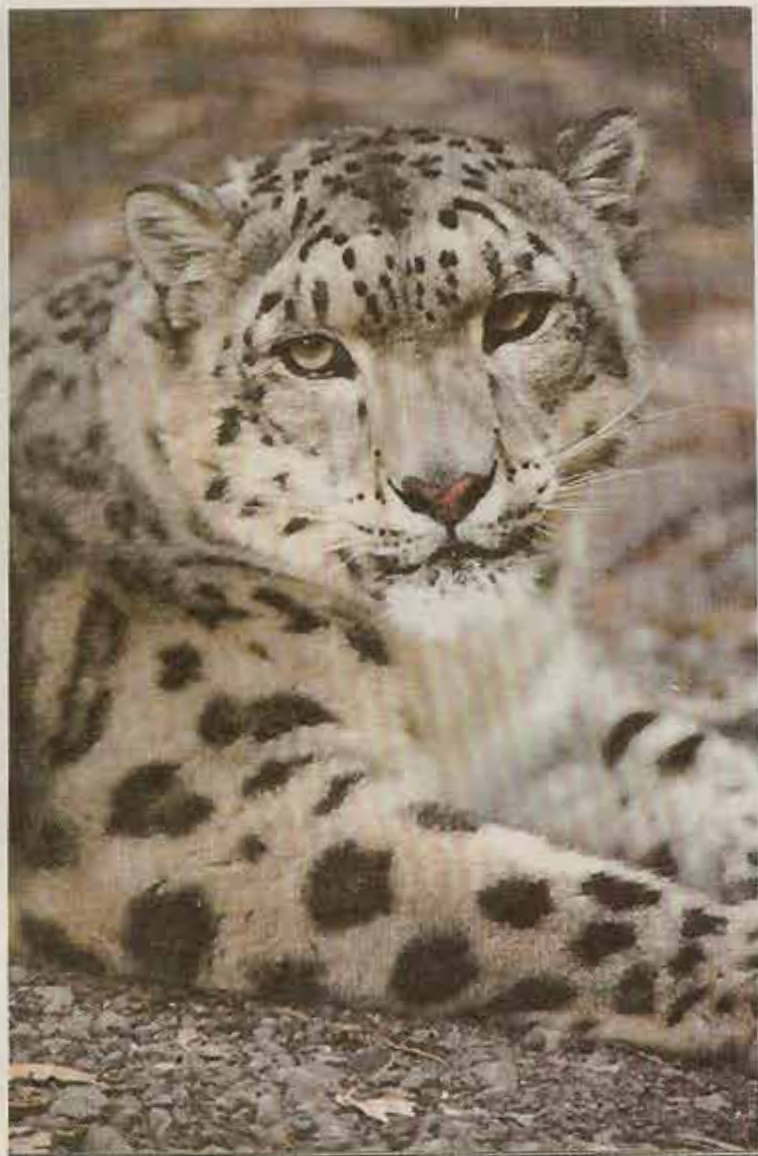
Strong cultural experience

Today, apart from Rumbak, nine other villages within and outside Hemis National Park offer

home stays. Ladakh's rich biodiversity and a strong cultural experience make the home stays a popular product for both domestic and international visitors. Last year, capacity building took the form of training village youth as nature guides, and many visitors were tempted to spend a few extra days exploring the surroundings, and discovering its wild flora and fauna with their guide.

When we first initiated the Snow Leopard Conservancy four years ago, the villagers could not understand why we had chosen the name of a despised predator for our organisation. Today, their sentiments are echoed in the words of one, "the wildlife of Rumbak is like the ornaments of our mountains!" Such statements illustrate the impact of our interventions, and contribute towards our mission of attitudinal change of the local inhabitants towards wildlife, particularly predators. At the same time, we know that changing attitudes will

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Rosheen Wangchuk

Snow Leopard, the elusive predator

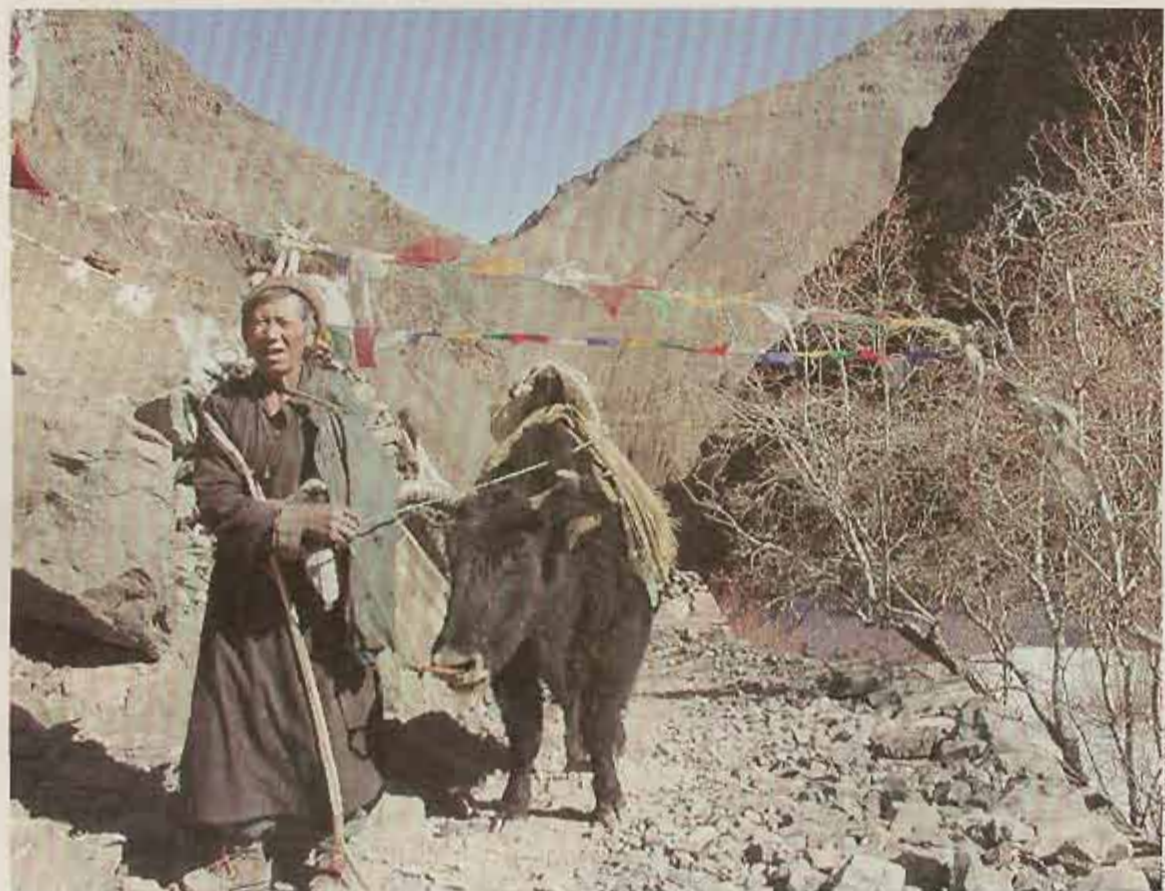
not happen overnight and that the communities must see social and economic benefits associated with wildlife protection.

Attitudinal change

Last year, the money generated for the conservation fund was lower than expected. This happened despite a good tourism year, and our evaluation pointed to the fact that a more effective marketing strategy was needed. However, the women used the money very effectively. They collected the garbage generated at the camping sites during the tourist season. They filled several sacks with cans and plastic bottles and hired packhorses from the village to ferry them across to Leh where they could be recycled. Small as this action may

seem, it marks an initial conservation action at the community level and serves as an indicator of attitudinal change in the right direction.

Another major focus of the Snow Leopard Conservancy has been to work with herders to improve their animal husbandry practices. We help them find locally appropriate solutions to improve their livestock enclosures so that snow leopards cannot get inside and devastate the herds. For each village, where the livestock pens are made predator-proof, five or more snow leopards are protected from retaliatory killings. Tashi Largyal from Sku-Kaya village, speaks for the herders: "In the late evening, we put our sheep and goats into the new pen and walked the two miles to our home. When we returned in the morning, there



Animal herders learn to co-exist with the snow leopard

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 leopards who might now go back to hunting blue sheep. Also we are very happy because now we no longer have to lie awake on the cold ground

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Traditional home stays emerged as a viable business that women could conduct while continuing with their agricultural activities.

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next to the pen. We can go home and get a good night's sleep."

Simultaneously, under the leadership and guidance of Dr. Rodney Jackson (a leading expert on snow leopards) we have been monitoring snow leopards and their prey populations. We are using remote camera "traps" to identify individual snow leopards, and closely estimate the number of cats

using the area.

Like the tiger in the jungle, the snow leopard stands as the flagship species and an indicator of a healthy environment in the mountains of central Asia and the mighty Himalayas. Known for its stealth and agility on steep rocks, this mysterious cat remains synonymous with the word "elusive". However, this highly endangered and protected cat does not live without threat from man for its survival. And likewise, man can learn to co-exist with snow leopards.

As the last rays of the sun disappear over the rust-colored mountains of Markha, Tashi herds his livestock back into the predator-proof pen after another day's grazing. As a result of the improved animal husbandry practices, "neither does the lamb die nor goes the wolf hungry" (an old Ladakhi saying).



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