

- ▲ Because snow leopards usually hide from humans, photographer Steve Winter used camera traps to take this photo and the one on the next page. The traps automatically took a number of photos whenever the animal came near.
- "When a snow leopard stalks¹ its prey among the mountain walls, it moves . . . softly, slowly," explains Indian biologist Raghunandan Singh Chundawat, who has studied the animal for years. "If it knocks a stone loose, it will reach out a foot to stop it from falling and making noise." One might be moving right now, perfectly silent, maybe close by. But where? And how many are left to see?

Best known for its spotted coat and long distinctive tail, the snow leopard is one of the world's most secretive animals. These elusive² cats can only be found high in the remote, mountainous regions of central Asia. For this reason, and because they hunt primarily at night, they are very rarely seen.

Snow leopards have been officially protected since 1975, but enforcing this law has proven difficult. Many continue to be killed for their fur and body parts, which are worth a fortune on the black market.³ In recent years, though, conflict with local herders has also led to a number of snow leopard deaths.

This is because the big cats kill the herders' animals, and drag the bodies away to eat high up in the mountains.

As a result of these pressures, the current snow leopard population is estimated at only 4,000 to 7,000, and some fear that the actual number may already have dropped below 3,500. The only way to reverse this trend and bring these cats back from near extinction, say conservationists, is to make them more valuable alive than dead.

Because farming is difficult in Central Asia's cold, dry landscape, traditional cultures depend mostly on livestock (mainly sheep and goats) to survive in these mountainous regions. At night, when snow leopards hunt, herders' animals are in danger of snow leopard attacks. Losing only a few animals can push a family into desperate poverty. "The wolf* comes and kills, eats, and goes somewhere else," said one herder, "but snow leopards are always around. They have killed one or two animals many times . . . Everybody wanted to finish this leopard."

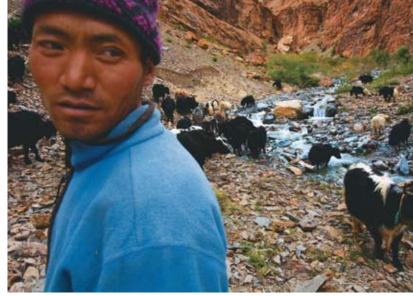
To address this problem, local religious leaders have called for an end to snow leopard killings, saying that these wild animals have the right to exist peacefully. They've also tried to convince people that the leopards are quite rare and thus it is important to protect them.

Financial incentives are also helping to slow snow leopard killings. The organization Snow Leopard Conservancy-India has established Himalayan Homestays, a program that sends visitors to the region to herders' houses. For a clean room and bed, meals with the family, and an introduction to their culture, visitors pay about ten U.S. dollars a night. Having guests once every two weeks through the tourist season provides the herders with enough income to replace the animals lost to snow leopards. In addition, Homestays helps herders build protective fences that keep out snow leopards. The organization also conducts environmental classes at village schools and trains Homestays members as nature guides, available for hire. In exchange, the herders agree not to kill snow leopards.

In Mongolia, a project called Snow Leopard Enterprises (SLE) helps herder communities earn extra money in exchange for their promise to protect the endangered cat.

Women in Mongolian herder communities make a variety of products—yarn for making clothes, decorative floor rugs, and toys—using the wool from their herds. SLE buys these items from herding families and sells them abroad. Herders must agree to protect the





▲ Stanzin Pulit, a yak farmer, has to guard his animals from snow leopard attack.

snow leopards and to encourage neighbors to do the same.

The arrangement increases herders' incomes by 10 to 15 percent and elevates the status of the women. If no one in the community kills the protected animals over the course of a year, the program members are rewarded with a 20 percent bonus in addition to the money they've already made. An independent review in 2006 found no snow leopard killings in areas where SLE operates. Today the organization continues to add more communities.

Projects like the Homestays program in India and SLE's business in Mongolia are doing well. Though they cover only a small part of the snow leopard's homeland, they make the leopards more valuable to more people each year, and in doing so, they help preserve this endangered animal.

¹ If you **stalk** a person or animal, you follow them quietly in order to catch or kill them.

² Something that is **elusive** is difficult to find.

³ If something is bought or sold on the **black market**, it is bought or sold illegally.

⁴ A wolf is a wild animal that looks like a large dog.

Snow leopards' big eyes are so good in low light that they are able to hunt in near total darkness.