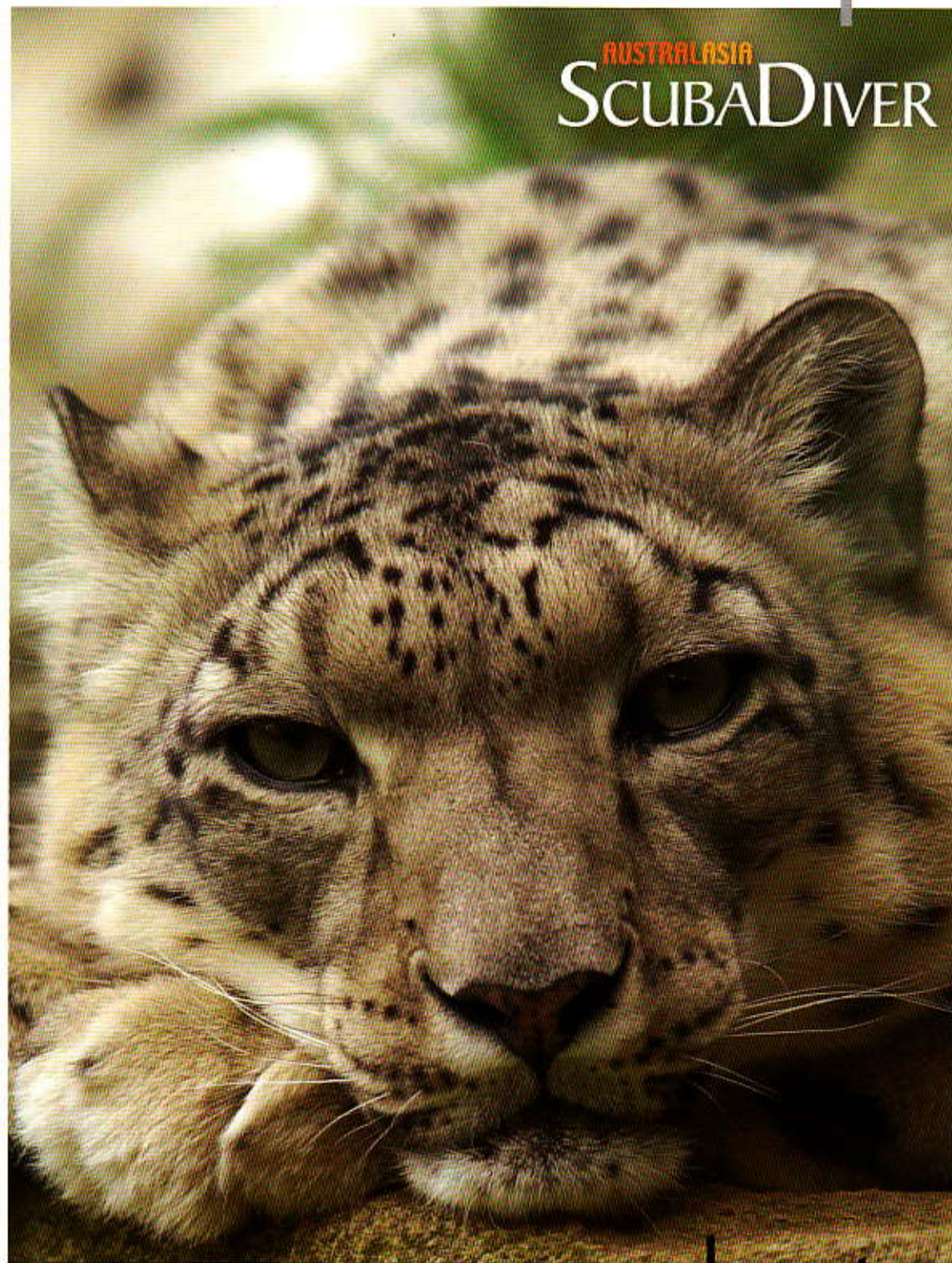


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The snow leopard, which roams the high mountains that arc around the Central Asian Plateau, is an elusive cat – but perhaps not elusive enough. Its shyness and solitary habits have not enabled it to escape from poachers. Illegal hunting, among other threats, has pushed the snow leopard to the brink of extinction.

## MARKETING SNOW LEOPARD

# survival

**Snow leopard** pelts command high prices in the black market fur trade, while bones from the cats are in demand as remedies prescribed by traditional Asian medicine. However, half a world away, the snow leopard is being marketed in an entirely different manner one that may help ensure its survival by building support among local people who share the cat is environment and those who live far from its native home.

Volunteers for the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT), a nonprofit conservation organization headquartered in Seattle, Washington, are sitting together at tables piled high with handicrafts made by women in Mongolia and the Kyrgyz Republic, preparing the items for sale. The rugs, scarves, mittens and other merchandise have all been produced through Snow Leopard Enterprises (SLE), one of the Trust's successful community-based conservation programs.

The SLE program exists in stark contrast to the illegal sale of snow leopard pelts and body parts, which only provides a temporary, unsustainable economic benefit to local poachers. With the help of SLE, it is more economically beneficial for local people to keep the snow leopard alive. Along with the handmade products,

Photo: © Orlipimages









**“DESIGNED to alleviate these conflicts between humans and snow leopards, and seek to guarantee the survival of the snow leopard while improving the lives of local people where the cat lives.”**

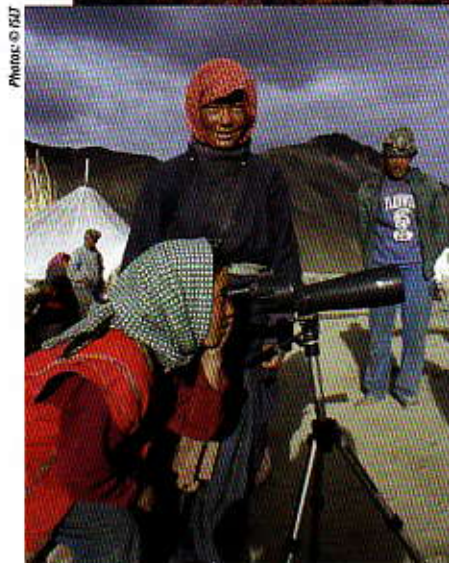
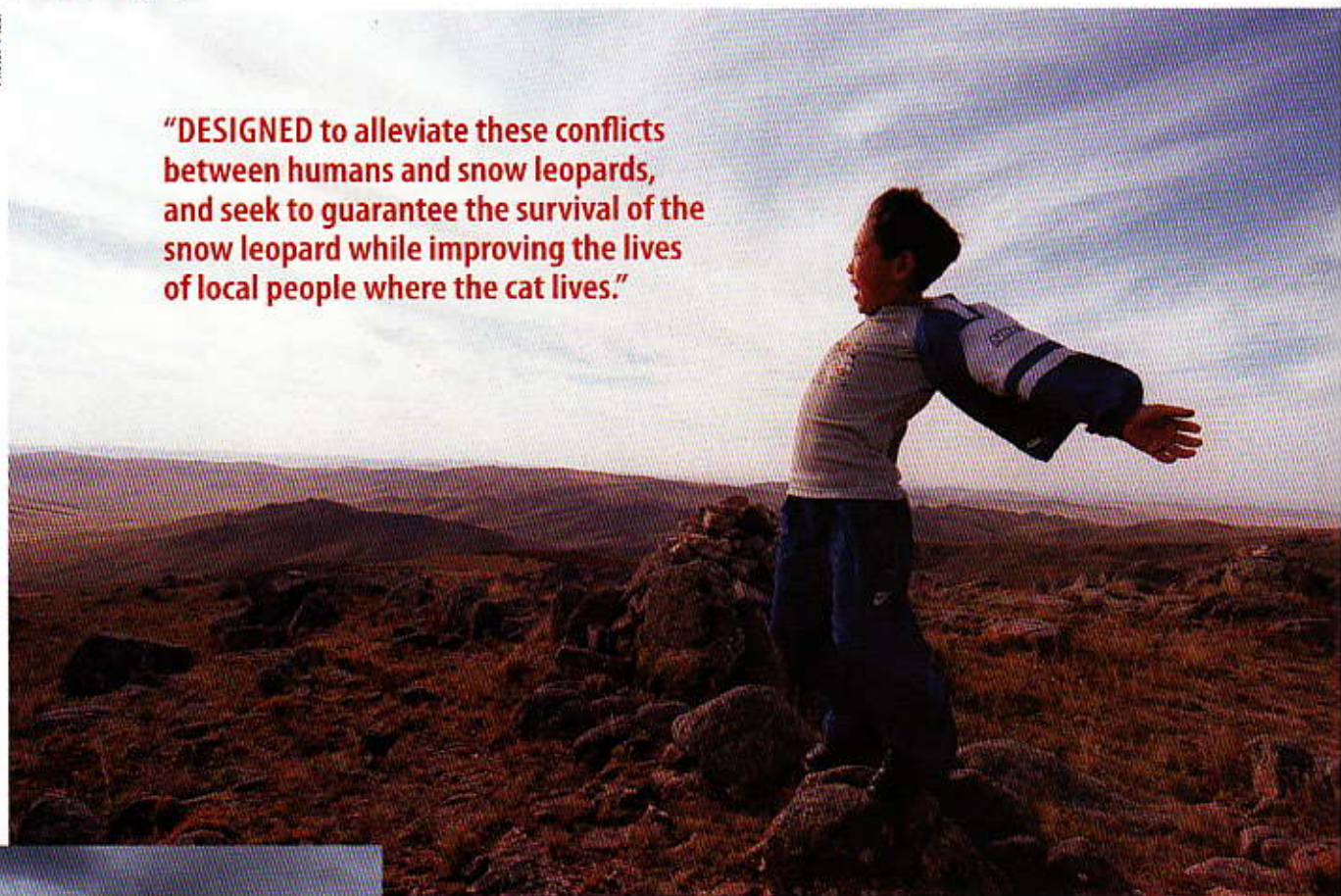


Photo © ISIT

SLE is also marketing a value system; that snow leopards are an important species that should be protected, while taking into account the considerations of the people who share their environment.

The snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), which ranges through the Himalaya, Hindu Kush, Tien Shan, and other Central Asian mountain ranges, has an estimated wild population size of only 3,500 - 7,000 individuals. On paper, the cat is well protected. Since 1972, it has been categorized as an endangered species by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) – the same classification accorded to the panda and the tiger. Trade of live animals, pelts, and other body parts is prohibited under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), and all 12 of the countries where snow leopards are found have laws prohibiting hunting them.

Yet lists and laws are likely to come to naught without the support of the people who share the cat's environment. In addition to illegal poaching, the snow leopard is threatened by habitat destruction and retaliatory killings by herders. As the human population grows, people push farther into the remote territory and high elevations where snow leopards live. They hunt the wild sheep and goat species that are the snow leopard's most important prey and their livestock compete for food with these wild grazers. Faced with declining prey populations, hungry snow leopards occasionally kill domestic livestock. To people who already live close to the edge of survival, the snow leopard is a predator that can spell the difference between economic hardship and economic ruin. The offending cats are often trapped or poisoned.

The Trust's conservation programs are designed to alleviate these conflicts between humans and snow leopards, and seek to guarantee the survival of the snow leopard while improving the lives of local people where the cat lives. The Snow Leopard Enterprises program grew out of a research trip that Dr. Tom McCarthy,



ISLT Conservation Director, and Priscilla Allen, former ISLT Program Officer, took to Mongolia in 1997. McCarthy was conducting snow leopard population surveys, and Allen was interviewing herder women about their interactions with the cats.

"As we drove across western Mongolia, we started brainstorming how we could help the local people in exchange for tolerating the snow leopard," McCarthy recalls. They reasoned that snow leopard predation on livestock wasn't rampant – a sheep here, a goat there – so even a modest economic incentive might help defuse the human-predator conflict.

"We could see they had a handicraft tradition, and they had lots of raw material, but no access to markets," McCarthy continues. The Snow Leopard Enterprises program brings these disparate observations together. The Snow Leopard Trust provides the herders with training and equipment for handicraft production, and markets the products at tourist attractions in Mongolia, at various stores in the US, through Eco-Sys & Eco-Fun in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe ([www.ecosysfun.com](http://www.ecosysfun.com)), and on their website ([www.snowleopard.org](http://www.snowleopard.org)). In return, the local people agree not to kill snow leopards or their prey species, and to follow responsible herding practices.

A 20 percent bonus is available at the end of each year if the community has complied with its agreement. But if just one person violates the contract, the entire community loses out, an arrangement that creates positive peer pressure and encourages the community to prevent poaching by outsiders.

Snow Leopard Enterprises began in Mongolia in 1998, and has since expanded to 12 communities throughout the country's western and southern provinces. In 2002 the program started up in the Kyrgyz village of Ak-Shyirak. More than 250 families now participate, boosting their annual household income by as much as 40 percent; much-needed cash that enables rural families to buy medicines and send their children to school.

The current SLE product line ranges from a Kyrgyz wool rug, stitched with an intricate swirl motif in soft cream and brown felt, to velvety camel wool yarn from the Great Gobi Desert of Mongolia. Baby booties, pillows, glasses holders, and ornaments are some of the newer items available. "We try to combine traditional materials, techniques, and symbols with designs and colors that will appeal to the international market," explains Jennifer Snell Rullman, Conservation Program Coordinator at the Snow Leopard Trust. For example, the slippers currently being



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Eco-Sys also has its own line of Snow Leopard plush toys for children.

For more info see: [www.ecosysfun.com](http://www.ecosysfun.com) or [www.snowleopard.org](http://www.snowleopard.org)



Photo: © ISLT



**“THE SUMMIT offered artisans the opportunity to exchange ideas and improve skills. The designs are great and the colors are much more vibrant.”**

Photos: © IST



made by the Kyrgyz women are crafted of felted wool, a traditional material, but use novel color combinations.

Many of the handicrafts currently being produced were developed at a week-long design summit in the Kyrgyz Republic in August, 2003. The summit brought together artists and designers from the Kyrgyz Republic and Mongolia; marketing experts from the US; conservation biologists; interpreters; and organizers from Mongolia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the US.

Snow Leopard Trust staff members based in Mongolia and the Kyrgyz Republic gave presentations on the skills and resources available in rural communities. Then, the artists and designers were turned loose with wool from the herds of SLE participants, and asked to create practical, easy to reproduce designs that were based on traditional crafts and would appeal to an international market.

“They did an amazing job,” says Snell Rullman. “The summit offered artisans the opportunity to exchange ideas and improve skills. The designs are great and the colors are much more vibrant.” Many items incorporate images of snow leopards, paw prints, or spots.

But that doesn't mean that Snow Leopard Enterprises is a one-size-fits-all solution. In the Spiti region of India, for example, the Trust is encouraging the peaceful coexistence of people and snow leopards by undertaking a livestock insurance program that would reimburse people for animals lost to predation. Meanwhile, villagers in the Chitral region of Pakistan helped develop a vaccination program that will reduce losses of livestock to disease and help enable them to absorb the occasional losses to predators.

Although these programs each look very different, the approach behind them is the same. “We use good science to develop conservation programs, and those

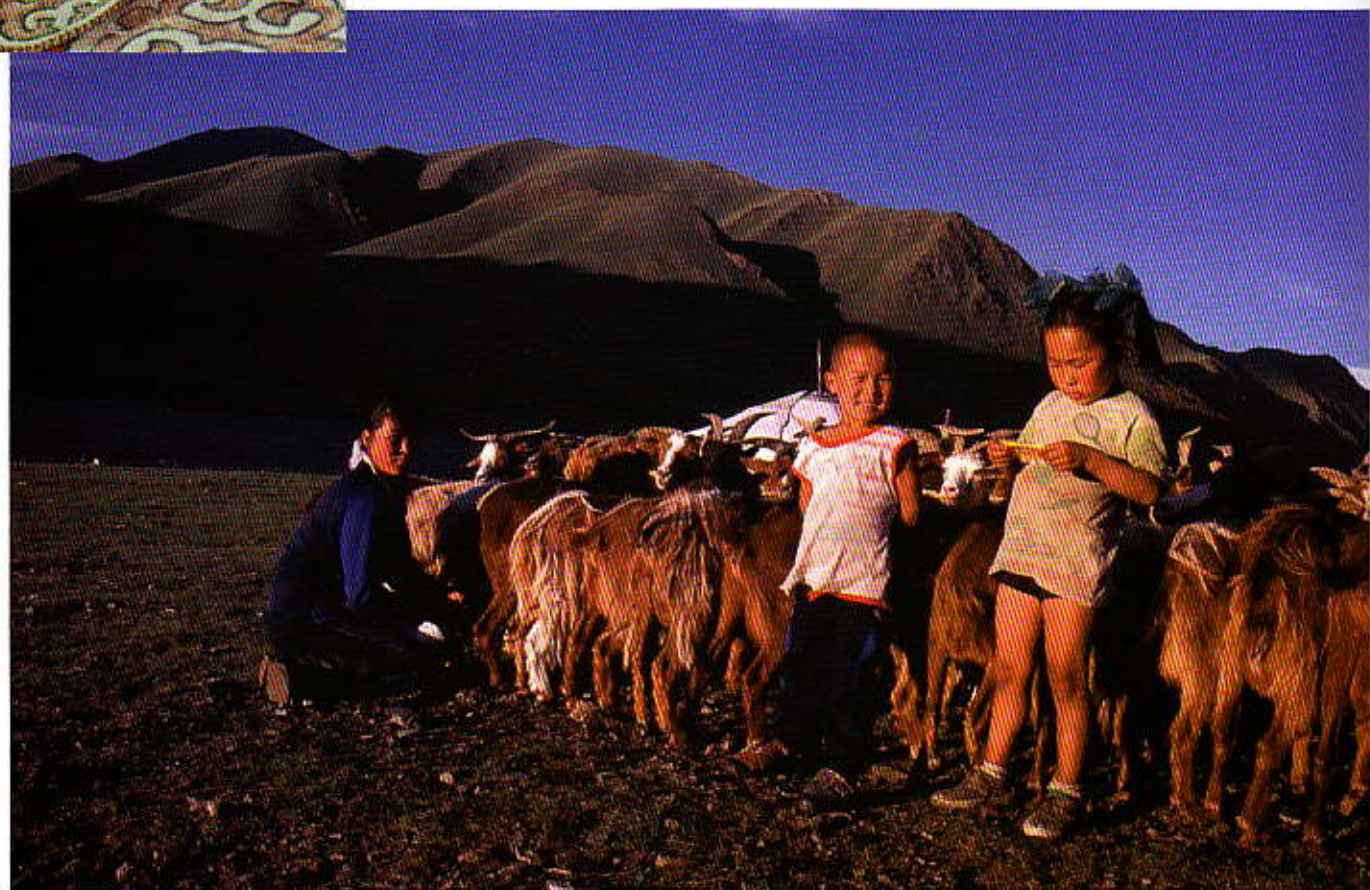


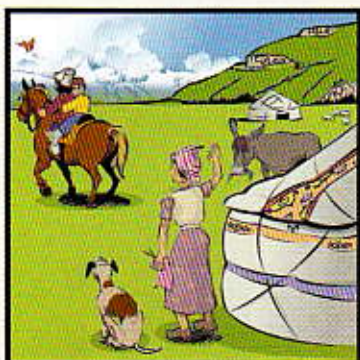
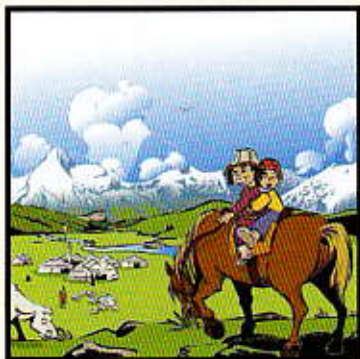




Photo: © ISIT







Eco-Sys is also producing a children's book to illustrate the plight of the Snow Leopard.

Photo: © B. Cagnat/Eco-Sys



conservation programs are always developed in close partnership with local people," says Brad Rutherford, Executive Director of ISLT. "The same principles lead to different community-driven solutions from place to place."

And those solutions are now producing measurable success. The population levels of snow leopards and their prey species in SLE program areas in Mongolia have now been monitored using standardized methodology for four years. More extensive follow-up is necessary, but the initial data suggest that snow leopard populations are increasing in some SLE program areas. In other regions, McCarthy suspects that snow leopard populations were relatively healthy to begin with, and ISLT conservation programs have prevented declines from occurring in the first place.

"Human attitudes are a good way to measure progress as well," says McCarthy. He reports that participants in SLE and other conservation programs have become much more tolerant of and even enthusiastic about the snow leopard's presence in their midst.

Meanwhile, people around the globe who purchase SLE merchandise have become more knowledgeable about the snow leopard's existence. The products sold by SLE do not merely provide economic benefits for those who craft them; they also serve as a vehicle for spreading awareness about snow leopards to consumers. The tags attached to each SLE product informs consumers that purchasing the product helps to protect snow leopards, and that "Every dollar brought in from the sale of these products goes back to women and their communities, providing money for food, medicine, education, and literally a new way of life."

Educating the public about the plight of the snow leopard is an important first step in generating support for the endangered cat, Rutherford emphasizes. In fact, ISLT's location in Seattle, thousands of miles from the nearest wild snow leopard, has proven to be an advantage in the Trust's education efforts. "The awareness problem is much worse in the US, Europe, and the developed parts of Asia & the Pacific, than it is among the people where the snow leopard actually lives!" Rutherford says.

With that in mind, the Trust is currently working to expand the availability of SLE products to other parts of the world. A company named Eco-Sys & Eco-Fun is



distributing SLE merchandise, developing additional snow leopard design products such as plush toys, and raising awareness via educational exhibits and cartoons for kids. Their partnership with ISLT aims to establish a new type of marketing and convince people that they can make a difference. You too can help the long-term survival of the snow leopard in the wild by visiting [www.snowleopard.org](http://www.snowleopard.org) and [www.ecosysfun.com](http://www.ecosysfun.com) where you can purchase Snow Leopard Enterprises merchandise and find out about becoming a member of ISLT. "I love this program," reports Rutherford. "Snow leopards are being saved and the lives of the people living with the cats are improving. The more products we can sell the more the program grows and the more snow leopards are saved. Everybody benefits." <sup>AG</sup>

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Photo: © ISLT



Photo: © ISLT/Milan Trykar

