

# Wildlife racket through Internet

Two gang members were arrested from the Lalkurti locality of the town and many threatened wildlife, including peacocks, parakeets and a rare albino civet cat were seized alive.

■SULABHA CHAKRAVARTY

**T**his may be the first case in the country linked with Internet wildlife trade.

Officials said members of the gang used the Orkut networking site for meeting new customers as well as to close deals with existing clients in the Middle East and Europe.

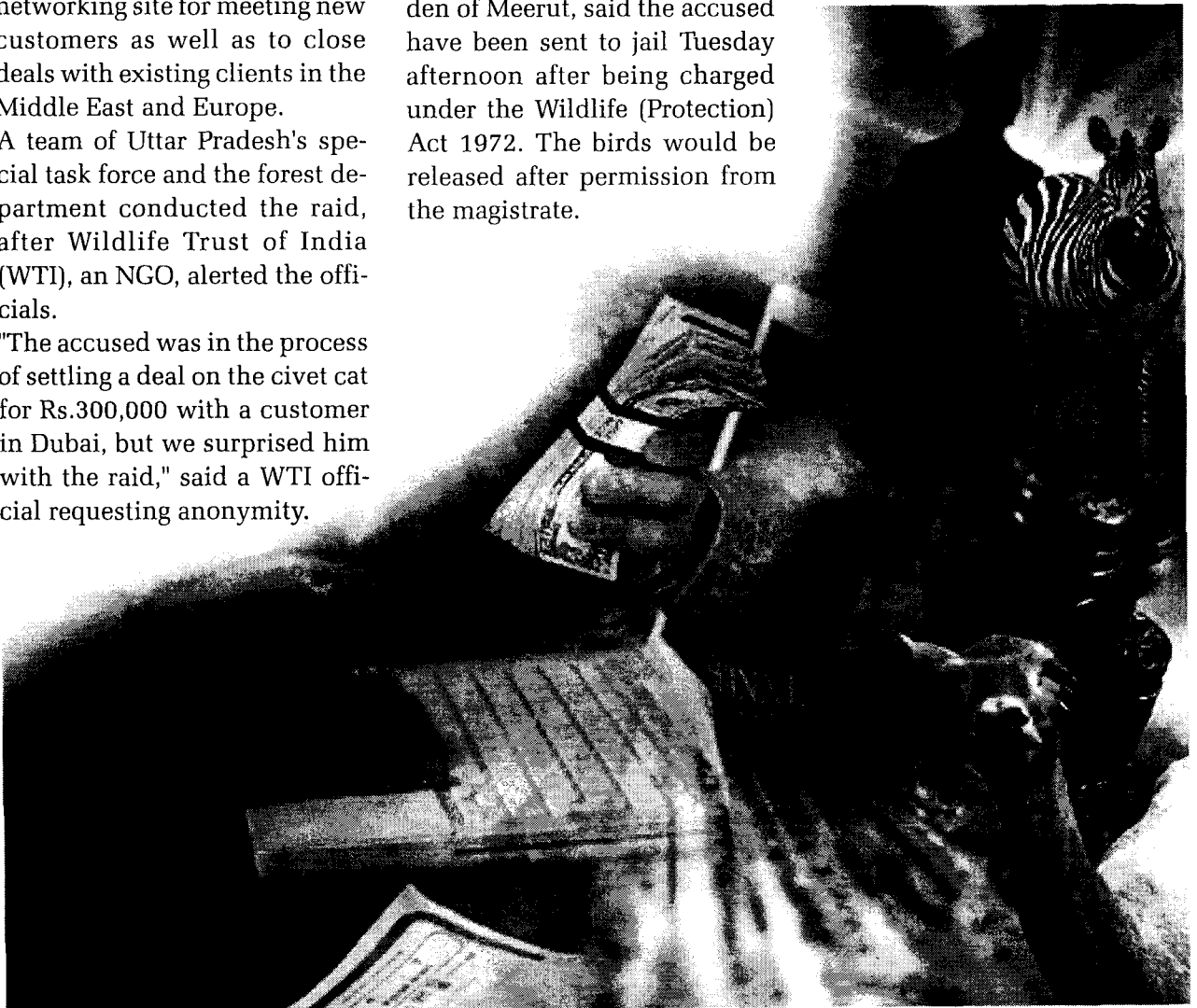
A team of Uttar Pradesh's special task force and the forest department conducted the raid, after Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), an NGO, alerted the officials.

"The accused was in the process of settling a deal on the civet cat for Rs.300,000 with a customer in Dubai, but we surprised him with the raid," said a WTI official requesting anonymity.

The civet cat may be the first albino common Indian civet ever recorded - a very rare species, he said.

Mahesh Chandra, wildlife warden of Meerut, said the accused have been sent to jail Tuesday afternoon after being charged under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. The birds would be released after permission from the magistrate.

Ashok Kumar, vice-chairman of WTI, said the crackdown has exposed a huge illegal market for birds on the Internet. But there is more evidence now to further





Wayanad district shares border with Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The elephants in the patrol, Dineshan, Kunju and Suryan, belong to the forest department.

The forest officials say that elephant patrol has many advantages.

"With the help of

this investigation, he added.

Kumar said NGOs in India as well as abroad have been urging their governments for implementing strict measures to stop the online wildlife trade.

International NGOs in the past even exposed websites where illegal ivory products had been displayed for sale, said Kumar, adding the latest arrest may be the first case involving the Internet wildlife trade in the country.

## Elephant patrol to check poaching

**An elephant patrol will roam the deep forests of Kerala in a bid to check poaching.**

The anti-poaching patrol in Wayanad district consists of three elephants, mahouts and forest officials.

"We started the patrol last week. The team has around 15 members. We arranged this patrol following information from Tamil Nadu authorities that poachers could become active along Kerala-Tamil Nadu border this season," K. Radhakrishna Lal, assistant wildlife warden at Muthanga in Wayanad, said.

elephants we can enter even thick forests and marshy areas. Elephants clear the way for those on foot. While riding on elephant better surveillance is also possible," Lal said.

The patrol at a stretch will spend three days inside the forest, keeping a close watch on all activities.

## Probe on into peacocks deaths

Clueless forest officials probing the deaths of as many as 28 peacocks in Ranjangaon near here were confronted by fresh finding of the bird plumage, suggestive of two more deaths, taking the toll in the last five days to 30.

The forest officer probing the

episode that has baffled the villagers and bird lovers, D G Raut said that peacock feathers had been recovered at Shikrapur in the latest incident even as forensic test results on the viscera of the 28 dead peacocks were being awaited by the department. About 50 km from here, Ranjangaon is known for a traditionally high population of peacocks as well as the famous Swayambhu Ganesh temple in Maharashtra. It made news when on August 22, villagers in the region discovered the bodies of 17 peacocks, followed by ten more the next day and another one on Sunday.

Deaths of 28 peacocks under mysterious circumstances prompted the Forest Department to launch an inquiry.

According to officials in charge of the inquiry ordered by Forest Minister Babanrao Pachpute who visited the spot, bottles of pesticides had been recovered from the fields where grains were strewn around apparently to feed peacocks who inhabit the adjacent forest.

The samples of grains, pesticides and water from the site too were being examined by forensic experts to determine the cause of deaths that have shocked the





peacock-friendly villagers in the region.

## Jenny, the elephant to stay in Dallas

Jenny the elephant isn't going anywhere. The Dallas Zoo announced that the pachyderm who weighs around 10,000 pounds (4,535 kilograms) will remain at her home of 22 years following an intense controversy over plans to send the animal to a wildlife park in Mexico. The decision to keep the elephant in Dallas "serves Jenny's best interests," said Gregg Hudson, the zoo's executive director.

Dallas Zoo officials had planned to ship Jenny to Mexico after her companion died in May. African elephants become unhappy when left alone.

But activists ripped the plan, saying 32-year-old Jenny is a nervous elephant who fears cars and would be miserable at the drive-through park in Mexico. Critics of the planned move had argued that Jenny would be much better off at the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee. That 2,700-acre (1,093-hectare) facility is a haven for

elephant for Jenny in the "next several months." A news release from the zoo says that Jenny has "adjusted well to Keke's passing, and is in good spirits."

Dallas Zoo officials said they have also expedited plans for a new elephant habitat. It had been set to be completed by late 2011, but is now expected to open by the end of next year or early 2010.

## Employee denies abusing dogs

An animal control employee is denying charges that he abused animals when he helped round up some 80 pets from a housing project in Puerto Rico last year. Edgardo Santiago is one of three men accused of tossing the dogs and cats off a bridge to their deaths in the northern town of Barceloneta.

Santiago testified on Tuesday that he stepped on a dog's snout but only after it

troubled elephants and is home to 17 of the animals. Protests were held in front of the Dallas Zoo last month.

A Dallas Zoo spokesman said they plan to get a companion

tried to bite him. He denied allegations that he dragged another dog across the floor.

The killings received international condemnation and prompted calls for a tourist boycott of the U.S. Caribbean territory.

The owner of an animal control company and two former employees have pleaded not guilty to cruelty charges.

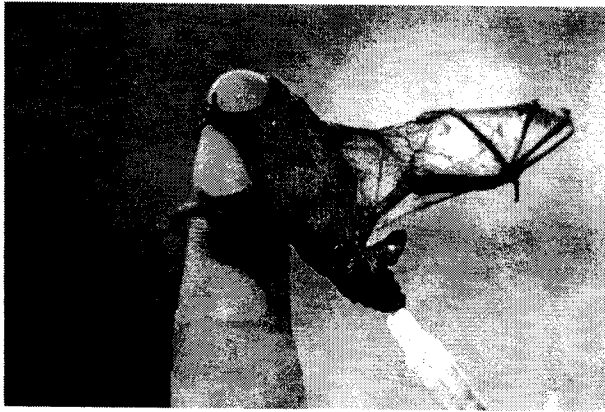
## Monkeys experience joy of giving

Monkeys can experience the joy of giving in much the same way as humans do, US researchers reported recently.

Tests in capuchin monkeys showed the animals consistently chose to share food with another monkey if given the option, suggesting they are capable of empathy, the team at the Yerkes Research Center at Emory University in Atlanta found.

"They seem to care for the welfare of those they know," Frans de Waal, director of the Living Links Center at Yerkes, said in a statement. His team tested eight female brown capuchin monkeys in pairs. They could choose a token that





## Overstocking in the trans-Himalayan rangelands of India

High livestock densities in rangelands can result in reduced animal production due

either to overgrazing or reduced per caput food availability, yet evidence for reduced animal production due to overstocking is scarce. Here simple animal production models establish the occurrence of overstocking in a traditional agropastoral system in the Spiti Valley of the Indian Trans-Himalaya. A sample of 40 villages showed that over 83% of Spiti's rangelands may be overstocked. Overstocking seems to be a classic case of the tragedy of the commons, as livestock is individually owned while the land is communally grazed. Recent socio-economic changes have probably contributed to high levels of overstocking. Even areas within wildlife reserves are overstocked. Conservation management needs to focus on creation of grazing free areas and management of livestock densities.

## Bat births surprise park keepers

A colony of fruit bats at a wildlife park in Essex sur-

prised their keepers with some unexpected deliveries.

Staff at the Tropical Wings park in South Woodham Ferrers, near Chelmsford, thought their Egyptian fruit bat colony was made up entirely of females.

But the theory was blown apart in late January when eight of the 15 bats produced babies.

The park's head of mammals, Fiona Martin, said the arrival of the young bats was a "complete surprise."

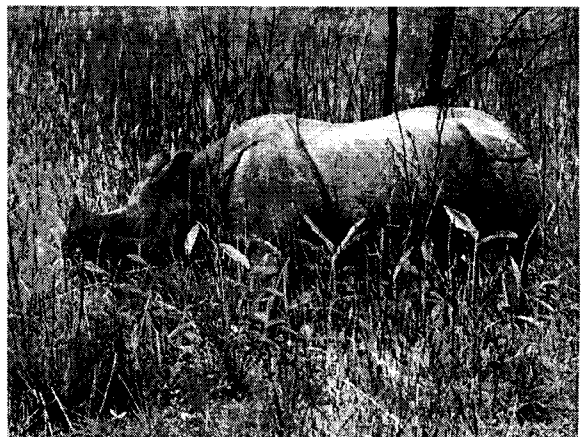
Staff said the babies, who cling to their mothers for about six weeks before flying at three months, will be 8in long when fully grown.

She added: "Males and females are notoriously difficult to tell apart but now it seems we will need to take a closer look."

Egyptian Fruit Bat or Egyptian Rousette (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*) is a species of Old World fruit bat found throughout Africa, except in the desert regions of the Sahara, and throughout the Middle east, as far east as Pakistan and northern India.

## The Great Indian Rhinoceros

Indian Rhinoceros holds the dis-



gave only themselves a treat or an option that rewarded both of them, called a prosocial option. Either way, the first monkey got the same amount of food. "Subjects systematically favored the prosocial option provided their partner was a) familiar, b) visible, and c) receiving rewards of equal value," De Waal's team wrote in their report, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "The fact the capuchins predominantly selected the prosocial option must mean seeing another monkey receive food is satisfying or rewarding for them," said de Waal.

"We believe prosocial behavior is empathy based. Empathy increases in both humans and animals with social closeness, and in our study, closer partners made more prosocial choices." De Waal's team next will see whether giving is rewarding to capuchins because they can eat together or if the monkeys simply like to see the other monkey enjoying food.

"Capuchin monkeys spontaneously share food in both nature and captivity, and commonly sit next to each other while eating," the researchers wrote.

inction of being the fourth largest animal, after the three elephant species. Known by the scientific name of *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the animal is found in only two places in the world, Assam (India) and Nepal. The Great Indian rhinoceros is a brilliant swimmer and has an acute sense of smell and hearing. Its maximum speed reaches 55 km/h, that to for a short period of time.

The only drawback of the Indian rhino, also known as the Great One-Horned Rhinoceros, is that its eyesight is quite poor. The sheer size of the rhinos has resulted in a few natural enemies. They may be attacked by tigers, but there are hardly any recorded incidents of a tiger killing a full-grown Indian rhino. However, they may kill unguarded calves at times.

## Physical Traits

Rhinos have a very thick coat, which is silver-brown in color and have the minimal of body hair. The shoulders as well as the upper part of the legs have wart-like bumps throughout. Male rhinos are larger than the females, with their weight being somewhere around 2260 to 3000

kg. The average height of an Indian rhinoceros is 1.70 m (5.7 feet) and its average length hovers around 3.50 m (11.7 feet). As the name suggests, the Great One-Horned Rhinoceros has a single horn, which grows to a length of 20 to 101 cm. It is present in both males as well as females and starts growing around 6 years after birth.

## Natural Habitat

The Great Indian rhinoceros is usually found inhabiting the tall grasslands and forests in the foothills of the Himalayas. Presently, it is found only in India (Assam) and Nepal.

## Behavior

Indian Rhino is basically a lonely and solitary creature and can be seldom found forming groups. The only exception to this behavior consists of groups of mothers and calves and breeding pairs. A male rhino of India usually has a home range, within which it lives. The range usually stretches from 2 to 8 sq km and may overlap with that of some other male.

During mating season, dominant males will not tolerate any other male crossing their territory. If

such a thing happens, dangerous fights are bound to ensue. Indian rhinoceros are mainly diurnal creatures and are quite active during the day. During daytime, you can spot them wallowing in lakes, rivers, ponds, and puddles. Through this process, they try to cool themselves.

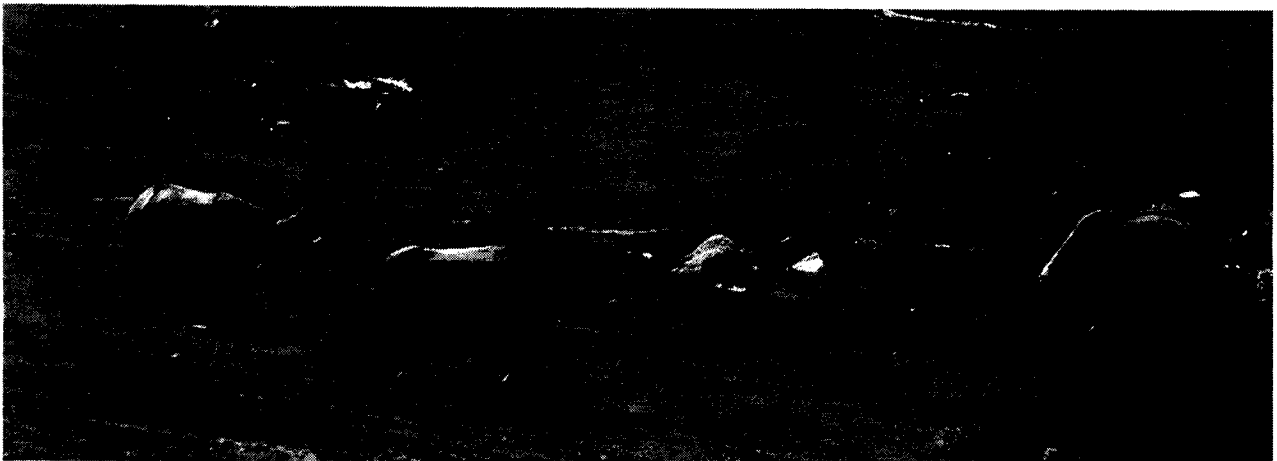
## Diet

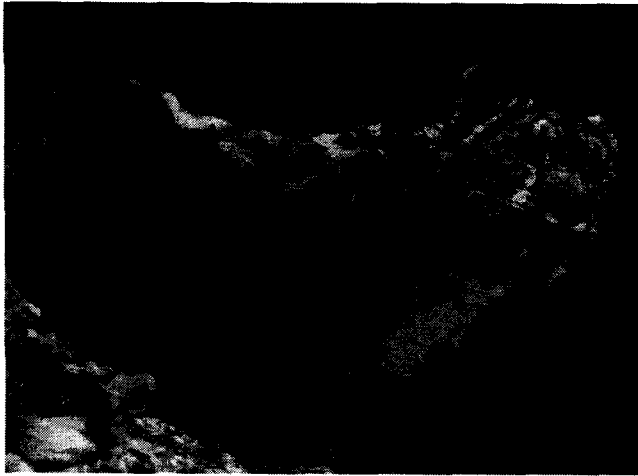
The Great Indian Rhinoceros is herbivorous. Its diet mainly consists of grasses, leaves, aquatic plants and fruits.

## Mating Behavior

The age of maturity of the Indian rhinoceros differs in males and females. A male rhino starts breeding at the age of nine, while a female rhino attains maturity after reaching five years of age only. When the mating season of a female approaches, she whistles to inform the males about the same. The mating season is also a season for dangerous fights between the male rhinos, which may sometimes result in death.

The gestation period is 16 months, after which a single calf is born. The interval between the births of two calves is around 3 years. A young rhino stays with





its mother for several years after the birth.

## Status

Indian rhinos found a mention in the list of the endangered species. Their population had been reduced to less than 100 in the early 20th century. Though, since then their population has increased, they are still under a threat of extinction. Presently, the population of the Indian rhinoceros is believed to be less than 25000.

## Threats and Protection

One of the major threats facing the rhinos of India is their large-scale poaching for the horn. The other threats include habitat deterioration. The Indian and Nepalese governments have taken a number of steps, with the help of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), to protect the Great Indian Rhinoceros.

The Great One-Horned Rhinoceros is mainly found in the following national parks of India:

## Mountain Leopard

Unique among wild cats, the smokey grey colouring of snow leopards has been the cause of

their near extinction at the hands of man. First brought to the attention of the Europeans in 1761, their thick, plush fur became popular world wide, and in spite

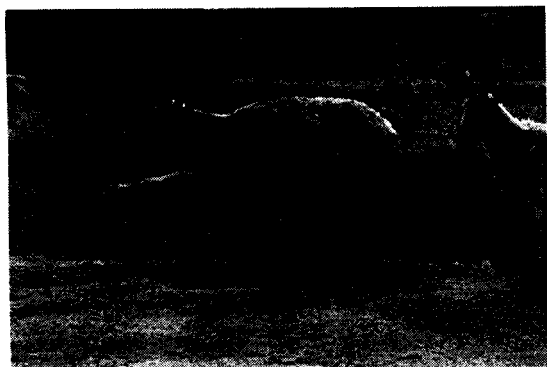
of legal restrictions, their wild population plummeted.

Their long, dense fur is smokey grey to yellowish, and a pattern of large, dark, rosettes and spots allows them to blend completely into their snow covered, rocky terrain. Unlike most spotted cats, the snow leopard has paler, less distinct spotting on the body and flanks, the head is dotted with smaller, round black spots. The chin, chest and belly are almost pure white. Being an animal of high altitude, their woolly fur is exceedingly long, up to 2.5 cm on the back and six cm on the belly. Their long, rounded tail is used as a wrap for warmth when sleeping, and the fur on the tail can be up to five cm long. Several rosettes form black rings on the upper side of the tail, with less distinct spotting on the underside.

Like the clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa* of Malaysia, the snow leopard is intermediate between big and small cats. Like the small cats, snow leopards purr but cannot roar, and they feed in a crouched position. Their skull is large, shortened and broadened with a short muzzle, high forehead and ver-

tical chin. Irises are pale yellowish to greenish grey, and the pupils are round. The backs of their short rounded ears are black at the tips and the base, with grey median bars. Short rounded ears are thought to be an adaptation for stalking prey in areas of little cover, an adaptation shared by other mountain dwelling species. Their broad foot pads are covered with a cushion of hair which increases the surface area and distributes their weight more evenly over snow. This cushion also protects their pads from the intense cold.

The agile snow leopards are renowned for their leaping ability, executing jumps from six to 15 metres through the air. Their long tail, up to two metres, acts as an effective counterbalance. They are found in the high mountains of Asia, in alpine meadows, rocky areas, snow fields and glaciers up to 5,400 metres. In winter, they follow the game to lower levels, down to 1,800 metres. Exceedingly shy and secretive animals, they prefer to move along ridge lines, edges of bluffs and bases of cliffs which provide an excellent view of the surrounding area. These solitary animals are active early morning and late evening, and often rest on huge nests built by black vultures during the daylight hours. These vantage points are not reached by climbing, but by jumping up. Radio telemetry studies have found that due to the scarcity of prey, snow leopards possess vast territories, which they defend by scent marking, scrapes, and fecal deposits. Historically found over much of high altitude Asia,



years in captivity, although it is believed to be later in the wild. They have lived to 21 years of age.

Snow leopards have suffered tremendously at the hands of man. There are an estimated 4,000 - 7,000 of these magnificent

including Mongolia, China through Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal, they have probably never been common, due to the harsh environment.

Prey species include ibex, wild sheep, musk deer, wild boar and marmots; pheasants, partridges, and domestic stock. In the winter months, snow leopards also consume a large portion of plant matter, much of it willow bark. Like the cougar *Puma concolor* of North America, snow leopards stalk their prey from an uphill position, creeping up and then grabbing it in a sudden spring. There is no record of any unprovoked attack on man.

Mating occurs in late winter or early spring, with one to five, usually two or three, cubs born after a 98 - 104 day gestation, weighing 450 - 500 grams. Births occur from April to June beneath rocks or in rock crevices, in dens lined with fur. Cubs initially have completely black spots, lacking the lighter central area of the adults. Their eyes open in seven to nine days, they begin crawling after 10 days, and at two months begin eating solids. The family stays together until the following winter. Sexual maturity is reached around two and a half

cats left, currently spread over a wide arc of the Central Asian highlands. Large ungulates have been hunted out of many areas of the high central Asian mountains, and large scale pika and marmot poisoning programs have also been conducted on the Tibetan Plateau. The cats are threatened by livestock owners who kill them as predators while at the same time increasing their domestic stock to the detriment of the cat's natural prey. Education in animal husbandry techniques and improved animal pens are essential steps in reducing this predation. Research has found that properly protected domestic stock is rarely taken by snow leopards. They are also poached for their skin, bones and other body parts for their perceived medicinal properties, principally in China.

Protected in India since 1952, hunting has nevertheless continued in northern India and the bordering Himalayan states because the fur is so valuable. In Mongolia, legal hunting is allowed for tourists, who pay thousands of dollars for the chance to shoot one of these rare cats. They are protected year round in Russia, but due to the economy, poaching is rising.

The International Snow Leopard Trust was formed in 1981 to oversee a variety of scientific and educational programs aimed at preserving snow leopards and their habitat. The Trust has enormously enhanced the co-operative effort between governments and their wildlife representatives.

At the recommendation of international furriers, it became illegal to process the furs of snow leopard. Unfortunately, skins are still arriving on the market, and coats from these and other endangered cats can be found in various gift shops in Nepal. The market is aimed solely at the tourist, as the local people do not have the means to purchase the coats. While most industrialized nations prohibit the trade in endangered animals, the public must be made more aware of this fact, as many banned items are seized by customs agents each year. Until the demand for exotic furs disappears in the richer countries, the incentive will remain for native people to poach these and other endangered animals. ■

