

Community-based ecotourism in Ladakh promotes positive perceptions of snow leopards

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Snow leopards in Ladakh often used to be persecuted by local communities because they preyed on livestock. With the establishment of the Himalayan Homestay Program, a community-based ecotourism initiative, snow leopards are now seen as valuable and communities are more supportive of their conservation. To maintain positive perceptions of snow leopards when tourism declines, the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust is educating communities about the intrinsic and ecological values of the snow leopard in combination with other measures.

Catching a glimpse of the famed, elusive snow leopard while trekking the rugged and remote mountains of Ladakh may be a dream come true for wildlife seekers. However, these predators have had a bad rap among local villagers, many of whom often regarded them as pests, because of their tendency to prey on livestock—sometimes killing many in a single incident. As a result, some local livestock herders resorted to retaliatory killings of these cats.

But the perception of snow leopards appear to be changing towards a more positive light, thanks to the establishment of an innovative Himalayan Homestays ecotourism program in the region, reports a new interview-based study. While the program has helped change attitudes, the researchers suggest educating communities on the ecological importance of snow leopards to instill greater value for this keystone species.

“The **Himalayan-Homestays Program** has been instrumental in changing people’s attitude towards the snow leopard,” said Tsewang Namgail, scientist and director of the **Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust** and co-author of the study. Retaliatory killings have “completely stopped in the villages where we have our ecotourism programs,” he added.

Ironically, “people who used to kill snow leopards in revenge, before our intervention, are today trying to attract the cat to their villages,” he revealed. “This was unthinkable 20 years ago when people wanted the snow leopard as away from them as possible.”

Listed as vulnerable by the International Union of Conservation for Nature (IUCN), around 500 snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) are found in the Indian Himalayas.

Camera trap image of snow leopards in Ladakh. Photo courtesy of the SLC-IT/Panthera.

To help offset losses from livestock depredation and increase tolerance towards snow leopards, the Himalayan Homestays Program (HHP), was launched in several valleys of Leh by the Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust in 2002 providing locals an opportunity to earn an additional source of income by hosting tourists. Locals were trained in housekeeping while youth acquired skills as guides to lead nature tours, which included possible sightings of the charismatic snow leopards.

To find out how the HHP affected local communities’ perceptions of snow leopards, the researchers interviewed 49 villagers in seven Ladakhi villages, four in the western Sham valley and three in the eastern Rong valley. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews that lasted from 15 to 60 minutes, villagers were asked if they were participants of the HHP and the values they placed on wildlife.

The team focused on three types of values: intrinsic, instrumental and economic. Intrinsic values refer to valuing nature even when it doesn’t offer any use to humans whereas aesthetic, spiritual and ecological values comprise instrumental values and economic values are based on money and market transactions.

“Himalayan Homestays, and ecotourism, in general, should provide economic value, but also ideally foster value, beyond economic, for the species itself, if that positive relationship is to persist through fluctuations in the tourism industry,” explained Kate Vannelli, lead author of the study, which was her Master’s dissertation at the University of Kent.

From pests to a source of pride

The results revealed that those who participated in the HHP (19) by hosting visitors felt a higher responsibility for wildlife compared with non-participants. They placed high instrumental value on wildlife, noted by the frequent mentions of the beauty of snow leopards during the interviews as well as a sense of pride and happiness in spotting wildlife in groups. Even those who did not directly participate by hosting visitors but had the HHP established in their community appreciated snow leopards.

Guests of the Himalayan-Homestay Program having tea in a homestay in Zaskar, where SLC-IT has various conservation programs. Photo courtesy of the SLC-IT/Panthera.

In contrast, most villagers in communities without the HHP, or other initiatives, expressed neutral or negative feelings towards wildlife, particularly frustration towards snow leopards, arising mainly from livestock depredation.

As a result, there is potential to transform the negative perceptions to more positive ones if more communities embrace the HHP and wildlife tourism, said Vannelli, director of development for the South Africa-based nonprofit, Global Conservation Corps. But she cautions that this case study is one amongst many conservation interventions, which are dependent on many factors and so “one size certainly does not fit all.”

“Incentives are crucial to change people’s attitudes and build support for conservation,” said Nabin Baral, a research associate at the University of Washington, explaining that they can be material (cash income, jobs, infrastructure, education) or non-material (values for sentient beings, altruism towards lower life forms). “As we know material incentives are finite but non-material incentives are not. While designing conservation programs, it is better if both forms of incentives are taken into consideration,” he stressed.

According to Baral who has studied snow leopard tourism in Nepal, “this study suggests to provide direct benefits at the household level to make snow leopard conservation program successful.” However, he points out that not all households may be willing or equipped to participate and such programs may not work elsewhere because “conservation happens in varied contexts.”

“This new study underscores the significance and potential of such tourism for improving coexistence between local communities and snow leopards,” said Jonny Hanson, managing director of Northern Ireland-based organisation Jubilee. In previous studies, Hanson along with Baral found that tourists in Nepal are [“willing to pay”](#) to support snow leopard conservation and that this support is also linked to [tourists’ knowledge](#) of snow leopards and their conservation values.”

Maintaining value for snow leopards if tourism drops

Another finding was that when wildlife isn’t the sole reason for income, it appears to hold the highest instrumental value. The team noted that while short-term participants of the HHP (3-7 years) held both instrumental and economic value towards snow leopards, long-term participants valued them mainly economically with a few claiming they may not appreciate snow leopards if tourism stopped.

Tsewang Namgail, director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, discussing environmental issues in Ladakh with the Buddhist Scholars of Ladakh. Photo courtesy of the SLC-IT/Panthera.

"I was surprised at the clear patterns that emerged throughout the interviews, especially around the level of dependence on tourism, and how this changed the relationship with snow leopards," Vannelli said. "There seemed to definitely be a 'sweet spot' in terms of economic dependence on tourism, and valuation of the snow leopard."

As people become exclusively dependent on income from tourism, wildlife can become commoditised. "One question that we ask ourselves is whether people will get back to their old ways of persecuting snow leopards if tourism were to decline due to war," stated Namgail. "Given that we share borders with both China and Pakistan, this has been a sustained concern."

Baral echoes these concerns, stating that tourism is both seasonal and volatile and, he added, since nature-based tourism focused on snow leopard sightings would occur on a small-scale and is difficult because of their elusive nature, diversified livelihoods are needed.

To preserve positive attitudes towards snow leopards regardless of their value in tourism, Namgail has been educating villagers, monks and youth through workshops since 2013, on the intrinsic and ecological values of the snow leopard.

"Snow leopard[s] can prevent flooding in the mountains. Snow leopards control the population of mountain sheep and goats, thereby preventing overgrazing and consequently enabling water retention by mountain slopes," he explained. "As villagers have experienced these, they understand these linkages easily."

Tsewang Namgail, director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, educating villagers about the importance of snow leopards in proper ecosystem functioning. Photo courtesy of the SLC-IT/Panthera.

Banner image: Bardan Monastery in Zaskar where SLC-IT regularly conducts environmental workshops. Photo courtesy of the SLC-IT/Panthera.

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