

Protecting snow leopards with local communities

Author - Tsewang Namgail, Published on - 28.8.2015

Written specially for Vikalp Sangam

Ladakh is home to a sizable population of the snow leopard, which is one of the most endangered animals on the planet. Snow leopard is a beautiful and charismatic species. Yet people, who share habitat with the cat, look down at it as an obnoxious pest. This is understandable, given that the animal sometimes kills multiple sheep and goats of farmers that are dependent entirely on livestock as the main source of income. The Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT) came into existence 12 years ago with the primary objective of resolving this human-wildlife conflict. Co-founded by late Mr. Rinchen Wangchuk, a Ladakhi mountaineer and naturalist, it is one of the most successful organisations in preserving the snow leopard and the Himalayan wilderness. Thanks to the organisation, today many villages across Ladakh get varied incentives by merely having the snow leopard walking in the mountains around them.



[Snow Leopard on the prowl, photo Jigmet Dadul](#)

Tsewang Norbu was born and brought up in the Ulley village in western Ladakh. He went to the village primary school. After that he helped his parents in cultivating the agricultural fields and tending sheep and goats in the mountains. Instead of learning things from white pages of a book, he learned the necessary life skills from green fields and brown mountains of Ladakh. Norbu and his parents lived under very harsh conditions, with little to eat. Later he became a successful farmer, producing and providing not only for his family, but also for the market. Norbu however faced several challenges, including wild animals damaging crops and killing livestock. "I hated snow leopards, as they would kill a large number of livestock", said Norbu. "We ran from pillar to post looking for relief and help, but all our pleas fell on deaf ears", he continued. That's when Norbu approached the SLC-IT.



[The Himalayan Hunter, photo Jigmet Dadul](#)

After conducting a feasibility study, SLC-IT first resolved the human-snow leopard conflict by providing sturdy door-frames, doors and wire-mesh to cover the open roof of Norbu's livestock pen. The snow leopard-proof livestock enclosure solved almost 95% of the problem of mass-killing in enclosures, and consequently reduced the conflict. However, occasional killing on high pastures persisted. To resolve this, SLC-IT started a community-controlled livestock insurance program, whereby the villagers collected premiums from insured animals, and SLC-IT provided a matching fund to create a corpus. The villagers then got compensated from the corpus, which keeps growing in the bank.



A predator proof corral in the Nubra Valley, Photo Jigmet Dadul

SLC-IT promoted Ulley as an important destination for tourists visiting Ladakh to see the snow leopard. Keeping in view the booming tourism in Ladakh, and the inequity in the distribution of income from tourism, SLC-IT initiated the Himalayan Homestays in 2002, which is being replicated by several organisations, including the government to address human-wildlife conflict. The first idea of traditional homestays came from a village woman who having observed the growth in trekking and proliferation of infrastructure, including numerous guest houses in Leh, visualized a different approach for rural areas. Thus, under a pilot program, dozen or so households interested in pioneering the homestays were given initial investment support such as blankets, mattresses, buckets, bed sheets and other fundamental items required to run a homestay. Initially, potential village-entrepreneurs were trained in hospitality, hygiene, housekeeping and other management skills. A mechanism was also put in place whereby 10% of the proceeds from the homestays was to be set aside for environmental protection in and around the villages. In return, the villagers assured abstinence from indulging in any retaliatory killing of snow leopards and other large predators. 'We went up into the mountains, looking for wolf pups and killed them', said Sonam Morup, Saspotsey. 'Some villagers also hunted wild animals like Asiatic ibex and Ladakh urial, but not anymore', he added.



A host serves tea to a guest in a homestay, Photo by Jigmet Dadul

Currently, SLC-IT has homestays in over 40 villages across Ladakh. This award-winning program transformed people's attitude toward the snow leopard from that of a despised pest to a valuable tourism asset. To bring tourists to the homestays, SLC-IT marketed and popularized the Sham trek. SLC-IT developed brochures, maps and also worked with travel agents to increase the tourists influx to the region. The homestay program succeeded well in providing additional income generation opportunities to local people. A recent survey on the impact of homestays on people's lives revealed that homestay-operating households are economically far-better than non-homestay households. The homestay owners also have a more positive attitude toward the snow leopard. The tourists combine the snow leopard viewing with homestay experience, which is one of a kind. "I was born in this valley and lived here all my life as a farmer. I hated it. Now that visitors come from distant places and appreciate our mountains and culture, it makes me proud to be a villager of Yangthang" said Skarma from Yangthang.



Tourists on a Snow Leopard trail, Photo Tsewang Namgail

Along with the homestays, SLC-IT encouraged villagers to start micro-enterprises such as eco-cafes and solar-shower facilities along trekking routes. The eco-cafes, which are running in nine villages across Ladakh, have helped in marketing Ladakhi food products, promoting ecotourism, and also in protecting the local environment. These eco-cafes encourage tourists to refill bottles with boiled, filtered-water instead of drinking bottled-water. The eco-cafes are operated mostly by the women. Thus, it also empowers women economically and socially. This efforts have been quite useful in enhancing the livelihood options for the villagers. However, the path has been quite treacherous with several challenges. One of the main challenges that they are now facing is unregulated mass tourism and related garbage problem. Currently, SLC-IT is helping villagers build masonry garbage bins in the villages and at the eco-cafes. Since these bins have separate compartments for degradable and non-degradable waste, rag-pickers from Leh come and carry the recyclable materials.

Furthermore, SLC-IT conducted handicraft training for village women in order to add value to the locally produced wool. The younger Ladakhi generation has stopped wearing the traditional woolen gown called Goncha, so farmers lost that market. Therefore, SLC-IT encouraged them to make woolen hats, socks and mittens that can be sold to the burgeoning tourists. Training in handicraft development is also a good way to keep the arts and crafts of Ladakh alive. This is crucial as several crafts such as stone engraving are at the verge of extinction. Hitherto, SLC-IT have trained people in 32 villages in Leh and Kargil districts. SLC-IT trains them mostly in knitting, natural dyeing and carpet weaving. The handicraft complements the homestay program well, as women keep the finished products in their homes for sale. And tourists buy the products as souvenirs. Some villagers also bring the surplus to SLC-IT's souvenir shop and other outlets in Leh. More recently, SLC-IT has been training women in making soft toy-animals using a technique called needle-felting, which is very popular among the villagers. Norbu makes upto Rs. 80,000 by just making and selling these soft toys to tourists.

Apart from conservation with the communities, SLC-IT also conducts scientific research. SLC-IT strives to generate scientific information that will guide its conservation actions. The main focus however has been on understanding the status, distribution and abundance of snow leopard and its prey species. SLC-IT carries out camera trapping exercises for estimating snow leopard population in the Ulley region. This is crucial because Ladakh still does not have a good estimate of snow leopard population in the region. Furthermore, SLC-IT studied the impact of climate change on snow leopard habitat use. It also investigated the drivers of human-wildlife conflicts, and developed conservation strategies to mitigate these conflicts. The organisation even trained villagers in basic wildlife surveys so that they can carry out surveys and monitoring activities themselves.



Bushnell (M) SLC49 57°F13°C ●

07-06-2013 08:02:47

[Camera Trap image of a Snow Leopard in Sham Valley, Photo SLC-IT](#)

SLC-IT believes that the future of the wildlife of Ladakh lies in the hands of the youth of Ladakh. Therefore, it also conducted nature guide training for the youth. Over 200 school-dropouts and unemployed youth have been trained so far to guide tourists around their villages. Such training also prevents the exodus of youth to the cities. The organisation also conducted workshops for school children and villagers to create much-needed awareness. Hitherto, the organisation has

educated over 2,230 school and college students. Earlier children in schools referred to wild ungulates in Ladakh as deer, despite the fact that Ladakh does not have any deer. Today, after 12 years of constant efforts in educating students, SLC-IT is happy to see students calling all wild ungulates with their respective names.



Garbage bins constructed by school students, Photo Sujatha Padmanabhan

After these interventions, Norbu like many others has changed. He no longer curse the snow leopards. On the contrary, he tries to attract snow leopards closer to his village, so that more people come to his village to catch a glimpse of this mighty cat. He even convinced the fellow villagers to free an area from livestock grazing for the benefit of the Asiatic ibex. Recently, the wildlife authorities caught a snow leopard in a livestock corral in Temisgam, and Norbu reportedly pleaded with the authorities to release the snow leopard in the mountains next to his village, but in vain. When SLC-IT captured three snow leopard cubs and their mother on a remote camera, Norbu was fascinated. Later he along with a couple of villagers went searching for their den up in the mountains. He even built a hide for viewing snow leopard and Asiatic ibex in an adjacent valley. For him the snow leopard is now the goose that lays the golden eggs. His attitude towards the animal is changed from that of despised pest to a valuable tourism asset. Norbu's story is the story of scores of others in villages, where SLC-IT has worked to resolve the conflict between snow leopards and humans.

Contact

[the author](#)