

Briefing on snow leopards in illegal trade – Asia’s forgotten cats

Summary of findings

- Snow leopards remain seriously endangered across their range, threatened by habitat loss, conflict killing, prey loss and poaching for trade.
- **No snow leopard Range State** has yet reported to CITES on this species under **Res. Conf. 12.5**
- Since 2005, EIA investigators researching the tiger trade in China have been offered **100 whole snow leopard skins**, along with various snow leopard bones, teeth and claws.
- While the open market appears to have declined, trade in snow leopard skins and body parts in China continues.
- Additional data from seizure reports suggest that aside from those skins offered to EIA investigators, there have been recorded **seizures of 151 snow leopard skins, made up of 77 across India, Nepal and China since 2000 and a further 74 across other Range States.**
- Market appears to have shifted towards whole skins for taxidermy and luxury décor.

Introduction

Snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*, synonymous with *Uncia uncia*) are one of the most endangered Asian big cat species, with IUCN estimates placing its global population of around 4000-6500 individuals spread across 11 Range States. As a result the snow leopard is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and is protected from killing and domestic trade by national laws across its range. The snow leopard continues to enter illegal trade however, primarily for its skins. **Despite this no snow leopard range states have yet reported on this species under Res. Conf. 12.5 on Asian Big Cats.**

Methodology

Since 2005, EIA investigators have conducted research into the illegal trade in Asian big cat parts and derivatives. While the focus of these investigations has been the tiger, EIA’s investigators have also documented the trade in other Asian big cat parts and derivatives, including snow leopard. Information was gained by identifying potential traders (through other wildlife products sold) and talking to them covertly, asking questions about what was available to buy, how much, where it had come from etc. Since 2006, Asian big cat parts have become less visible, rendering visual surveys less effective than covert activities. Wherever possible EIA attempts to gain solid evidence of products offered – through covert or open film, stills images or on voice recordings. Conversations were secretly recorded or filmed by investigators. EIA’s investigators are also careful not to ‘lead’ those they are talking to, but allow them to disclose the information unprompted, simply by asking questions. Following enquiries, investigators were frequently shown illegal snow leopard products, sometimes at a second location, or were told to return to the premises at a set time to see the products.

EIA investigators offered 100 snow leopard skins from 2005-2012

Since 2005, EIA’s investigators have uncovered 100 snow leopard skins for sale across western and central China, particularly in Linxia in Gansu Province. Investigations in 2012 confirmed that the trade is ongoing. Traders have indicated that skins were sourced from China, Mongolia, India, Nepal and Pakistan. While the scale of the open trade has declined since 2005, it is impossible to estimate the true size of the market, as in common with the rest of the Asian big cat trade it has become increasingly secretive (see Table 1).



| | Linxia | Lhasa | Xining | Songpan | Kangding |
|-----------|------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|----------|
| 2005-2012 | 89 4 snow leopard waistcoats | 7 | 1 | 1 | 2 |

Table 1. Whole Snow leopard skins (unless indicated otherwise), documented by EIA investigators in western and central China, 2005-2012

Note: This data is indicative only; EIA investigators were not looking specifically for snow leopard products, nor did EIA investigators visit the same locations every year. Year by year and city by city data is available.

Seizures of 151 snow leopard skins from 2000-2012

The skins directly observed by EIA investigators posing as traders represent just a small sample of the total skins in trade. In addition there have been reported seizures of at least 77 snow leopard skins dating back to 2000, spread across India, Nepal and China, and a further 74 across the rest of the snow leopard's Range.¹ While this is less than the number of leopards and tigers that have been intercepted in the same period, it remains a significant quantity for such an endangered species. In addition, a rule of thumb used by Customs indicates that seized contraband represent just a tenth of the illegal trade, suggesting it is possible over 1000 snow leopard skins may have been trafficked in this time.

Market focusing on taxidermy and home decor

Prior to 2007 the majority of snow leopard skins on sale in China were being marketed for use as rugs and wall-hangings, or as elements in traditional waistcoats worn in central China. In the last few years the market has become increasingly geared towards the luxury ornament and taxidermy sector, with specimens being prepared with head and paws intact or mounted on red backing fabric. Again, this fits trends seen in the illegal tiger trade, where specimens seen by investigators are prepared for the luxury home décor market. Snow leopard bone appears to be offered as a substitute for tiger bone for medicinal purposes.

Urgent need for information and reporting

At the very minimum Parties to CITES should begin to report useful information on snow leopard poaching and trade, including estimates of the following:

- the number of snow leopards poached and entering trade, and the nature of the trade
- the number of cases which have or are being investigated to identify criminals engaged in the trade, from source to destination
- the number of arrests, seizures and convictions for snow leopard trade
- sentences posed against successful convictions
- number of INTERPOL ECOMESSAGES relating to criminals engaged in international snow leopard trade completed
- trans-boundary issues affecting snow leopard trade

ⁱ EIA illegal trade database, compiled from seizure reports from NGOs, media, CITES and governments.

Recommendations to tackle illegal trade in snow leopard products

- All snow leopard range states report to CITES under **Res. Conf. 12.5 (Rev COP.15)** which covers all Asian big cats, including enforcement activities, either by Inf. Doc or verbal report to COP 16.
- All snow leopard range states to submit confidential intelligence on the international illegal snow leopard trade to their INTERPOL National Central Bureaus.
- All countries of snow leopard products mount **targeted public awareness campaigns** to reduce demand for snow leopard parts and derivatives, with a particular focus on working with Hui communities in China among whom the sale of snow leopard products has traditionally taken place.
- Enforcement authorities in China mount **targeted intelligence-led investigations** into snow leopard trade in known historical crime hotspots, such as Linxia in Gansu Province and Xining in Qinghai.
- Snow leopard ranges states use the Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit produced by the **International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC)** to produce a road map to combat trade and produce a strategic enforcement action plan.