Domesticating Wildness: Snow Leopard Tourism and Evolving Multispecies Relationships in the Indian Himalayas | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcription for the recorded event “Domesticating Wildness: Snow Leopard Tourism and Evolving Multispecies Relationships in the Indian Himalayas” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on May 7, 2025, and was moderated by Dr Faisal Moola. The guest speaker was Dr. Karine Gagné.

Transcript:

Dr. Faisal Moola

Okay, well, thank you everyone. Good morning or good afternoon or good evening. My name is Faisal. I'm an associate professor in the Department of Geomatics at the University of Guelph. I am a colleague of Sharada’s and Karine’s. I am going to be helping to facilitate today's discussion with our keynote speaker, which is Karine Gagné. She's going to be speaking today on the topic of *Domesticating Wildness: Snow Leopard Tourism & Evolving Multispecies Relationships in the Indian Himalayas*.

I have a few logistical things to go through, but before we begin that, I'm going to quote my favorite author and radical scholar, which is Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci once remarked, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

I think his words are very timely right now because we all woke up this morning to yet more conflict in the world. Unfortunately, in the geography of where Karine is going to be speaking to us about today. But I really expect that Karine is going to give us a sense of where there is optimism and where there is will.

So, today's talk is being sponsored by the CIRCLE Institute. The institute was established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph. It's referred to as the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement. CIRCLE aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting edge research on India, South Asia, and their diasporas to showcase, advocate, catalyze and foster an equitable, respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging and unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

Now, while we are meeting online today, we must recognize and acknowledge land and territory. This talk is sponsored by the University of Guelph, and this university is established on Indigenous traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg people, specifically, the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. I want to recognize that this place is home to many past, present, and future First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. I also want to

recognize the large number of global Indigenous peoples who are attending today's talk and who are either students or faculty or staff at the University of Guelph as well.

Our speaker today is Dr. Karine Gagné. Karine is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph. Her research work is based in the Indian Himalayas, where she studies a range of issues including climate change, ethics of care, human-animal relations, state production, citizenship and climate knowledge. She's the author of *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas* that was published by University of Washington Press in 2019. She was actually awarded a very important prize for this book, which was the *James Fisher Prize*. Her work has also been published in numerous journals, including *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Disasters*, *Current Anthropology*, and *Social Anthropology*.

I'll just tell you a little bit about the logistics for today. Karine is going to speak for about maybe 40-43 minutes, which will give us some time at the end for questions and answers. I would ask that everyone please mute yourself. Please do not put your video on. The Q&A will be handled by myself. So, if you would like to ask a question of Karine or perhaps you have something you would want to reflect upon, you can raise your hand by clicking on the icon at the bottom of the screen, or you can type your question or comments into the chat box any time during the event. I'll curate those questions and then I'll read them out to Karine after she's finished speaking. We'll ask you to please respectfully keep your questions, comments brief so that we have enough time as possible to allow Karine to address your inquiries.

The event is being recorded with the hope that it will be made available later. I want to acknowledge the fact that we have a number of students from the University of Guelph's Masters of Conservation Leadership program who have joined us to listen to Karine's talk because they're quite interested in her research. We're going to make sure that, Karine, your talk is available to our MCL students, many of whom are from all across the planet, including India.

Finally, I want to just recognize that there's going to be another speaker. I'll repeat this information at the end of today's session, but you are all invited to the next webinar, which is sponsored by CIRCLE. With Bhagya Shree Nadamala, which is going to be on Wednesday, the 11th of June, and more information will be on the CIRCLE website. With that, Karine, whenever you're ready, please proceed.

Dr. Karine Gagné

Thank you so much Faisal, for this nice introduction. And thank you, Sharada and the people at CIRCLE for organizing this. I am an anthropologist, so there are a lot of ethnographic descriptions in what I'm presenting. If this takes longer than the time we have, I'm also available for a question if it goes beyond the hour a bit.

Padma Dolma, a woman in her early 60s, runs a homestay in Rumbak, a village located in Hemis National Park in Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas. Rumbak is a hotspot for snow leopard

watching. During the winter, the community receives tourists from all over the world who, guided by snow leopard spotters and naturalists, spend hours with their cameras focused on a landscape where they can catch a distant glimpse of the elusive cat.

A few years ago, Padma was hosting an elderly European woman who, after years of saving money, came to Ladakh to realize her dream of seeing a snow leopard. After a few days in Rumbak, the woman eventually had a sighting of the animal and even she recollected to Padma at night with tears streaming down her eyes. Crying and other intense emotional responses are indeed very common among tourists who see the elusive beast for the first time. "Why are you crying?" asked Padma, curious. "I've been waiting all my life to see a snow leopard in the wild," explained the woman. The incident left Padma puzzled. She could not comprehend why, seeing a snow leopard would instill so much emotion.

In fact, she has always been curious as to why people come from so many different parts of the world to see snow leopards. Why did she not experience the same profound emotion for this animal while tourists could shed tears at its mere sight? She had also witnessed on several occasions how some became emotional even when they were not able to spot this elusive creature, often dubbed “the ghost of the mountain” in popular accounts. This left her confused and wondering whether there was something wrong with her.

One thing that Padma concedes, however, as we were discussing, is that it's surely a fascinating beast. The snow leopard, which was classified as ‘endangered’ by the IUCN until 2017 when it was reclassified as ‘vulnerable’, much to the chagrin of some scientists, is renowned for being a notoriously elusive animal not commonly seen even among the Himalayan inhabitants who live in its habitat.

Like many, Padma clearly remembers the first time she saw a snow leopard in her life. When she was around 20 years old, she was in the mountains with another woman, along with their flock of sheep and goats. Then, a snow leopard came, took a goat of an average size with its tail and threw it on its back. To carry it, and I'm quoting her, “as a human would carry a heavy bag or someone on their back.” She remembers being stunned by the animal's agility with its tail. As she recalls this sighting, the emotion is palpable as she gazed towards the mountain where the scene unfolded nearly four decades ago.

Snow Leopard tourism in the Indian Himalayas has developed over the past two decades, booming particularly in the last five years, and attracts wildlife enthusiasts and photographers, both amateurs and professional from all over the world. It is an enterprise that leverages the mystique of an animal that has gained in popular media -- a spiritual outlook through accounts of inner journeys such as Peter Matthiessen's famous novel *The Snow Leopard*, as well as wildlife documentaries like *The Velvet Queen*. Nurtured by these popular narrative and wildlife documentaries that emphasizes the animal's elusive nature, tourists arrive in the Himalayas with effective disposition that often makes snow leopards fighting a highly emotional experience.

But for Padma Dolma, like for other inhabitants of the High Himalayas, the snow leopard has long been a nuisance - a predator that regularly makes devastating attacks on domesticated animals. It has long been treated accordingly with retaliatory killing, and they will get the returns more than fascinations.

For residents of the Indian Himalayas, a snow leopard sighting is a rather rare event, yet the animal is quite present in the collective imaginary. People hear stories of predation when they happen because the news of such incidents usually travels very fast in the villages. But more than fascination, people in villages of Ladakh and Spiti often experience intense fright when they encounter a snow leopard for the first time.

As Nobu, a man from Kibber in Spiti puts it in reference to the time before the snow leopard was at the center of winter tourism, "it was an animal we would hear by name from our elders, but sightings were so uncommon that we would find that when we would finally encounter one, we would be scared."

Lobsang Yanchen illustrates this well. Coming from the village of Losar in Spiti, where snow leopards are rarely seen, she moved to Kibber after getting married. Kibber is the primary location for snow leopard sighting in the region, as the village is flanked by an immense gorge that serves as their territory. She vividly remembers her first encounter with a snow leopard and she recalled the experience with deep emotion. It happened seven years ago when she was tending to the yaks in the pastures. Suddenly she saw a snow leopard descending from the mountain towards her. There was a man not too far in the pasture and feeling terrified, she called out to him with all her might, but he could not hear her. Overwhelmed with fear, she went to hide behind a rock.

And while encounters with a snow leopard sometimes remain a frightening experience, today the animal is also the subject of much curiosity. In Ladakh and Spiti, when someone spots the animal roaming around the village or the pasture, a chain of phone calls and text messages will soon follow to alert spotters, neighbours and family members, something that often leads to the gathering of interested viewers.

Tchizin, a woman from Tashigang in Spiti, summarizes well how tourism has shifted the interest for the elusive cat. "Before tourism, we didn't have any interest in seeing snow leopards," she explains, continuing, "but nowadays there is an interest, so people keep an eye for that."

Witnessing the emotional reactions of visitor to tourism development, Padma, who I introduced in the beginning, began to cultivate an interest in the animal and took it upon herself to learn more about it. She takes a keen interest in listening to tourists recollecting their stories of sighting. Tour operators and tourists sometimes leave Snow Leopard related books in her homestay and she takes the time to look at the images. When a sighting takes place near our home, she sometimes indulges in a break from her busy work at home to have a look.

Padma's newfound interest in the snow leopard, which a man from Rumbak once described to me as, “our gold," is, however, not fully due to its economic significance as a purely utilitarian

analysis might suggest. It's also anchored in changing feelings for an animal that owing to a flourishing niche tourism, shifted from a wild and distant predator into an increasingly familiar accessible and intriguing one.

So how does snow leopard tourism reshape multi-species relationship? In this presentation, I demonstrate how the growth of snow leopard tourism relies on the evolving relationship between local communities and the endangered animal, which has become a stable source of income. With tourism and the steady decline of the local pastoral economy, the perception of the snow leopard as a subject of interest and curiosity among local residents is increasingly replacing that of a nuisance and a threatening predator.

Here I examine the changing multi-species relationship involved in this tourism, from the development of expertise in spotting the notoriously elusive animal to the emotion generated by these encounters. This presentation builds on research conducted in the region of Ladakh in North India, where I have been doing research since the past 15 years, and Spiti – which is a new field site to me. In this video, we can see women from Ladakh looking through a spotting scope when there is a snow leopard sighting. These two places have become hotspots for snow leopard watching. It is based on a total of 58 interviews conducted with tourists, spotters and individuals residing in or around villages where snow leopard tourism takes place.

It also builds on hours of participant observation and informal conversation during ongoing fieldwork since 2021. Fieldwork and interviews were conducted by myself and my research assistants, Tenzing Norbu and Jigmat Lundup, and by my MA student, Nigel Marimuthu. The picture I am showing are of myself and Jigmat Lundup [3 images of Karine and Jigmat in the field are displayed on-screen. The top-left image is of Jigmat with a scope beside him. Bottom-left image is of Karine and Jigmat, with someone behind them using binoculars. The right image is Jigmat and a group of people looking into the distance with equipment such as scopes scattered around.]

To understand the changing perception of snow leopard among Himalayans community requires looking at the past and a place to look for this is hunting, which was quite common in the Indian Himalaya during the colonial era and was done for personal gain or bounty. In his book, The *Snow Leopard and the Goat: Politics of Conservation in the Western Himalayas*, Shafqat Hussain notes that there was a consistent flow of snow leopard pelts available for Western European markets during the early 20th century.

The primary sources of these pelts were big game hunters and commercial trappers who cured the skins for European buyers, particularly from regions in Tibet and India. In British India, local hunting guides known as *shikaris* were responsible for track trapping snow leopards and preparing their pelts for sportsmen, or game hunters, or tourists visiting Srinagar, in Kashmir. It appears that this trade was, however, not organized systematically and that the overall quantity of pelts traded was relatively small.

In the case of India, it seems like the trade in snow leopard pelts largely targeted outside markets. It seems in Ladakh, wearing clothes lined with snow leopard belt was never done as it

was in other parts of the Himalayas, but more research is needed to confirm this. Also, I need to mention that what I am presenting here is “fresh out of the oven”, so there are still things that I'm working on.

Available information in published books suggests that Ladakh and Spiti were never as popular as Kashmir among game hunters. Interviews conducted with elders did not lead to much information as to how the local hunters were participating in this economy. But according to Puntsok Namgyal from Kibber, who was age 84 years old at the time of the interview, local hunters would sometimes sell animal skins, but it's not clear whether this was part of an organized business or if the pelts were sold only sporadically to outsiders.

Generally, the pelts would not be strictly snow leopards but would also include other wild animals such as ibex pelt. According to the same man, people in Kibber were not accompanying foreign hunters/game hunters as local hunting guides as it was the case in other parts of the Himalayas. But hunting was practiced, and it seems like most villages had their hunters. And there's even, for instance, this is a cave in Kibber village has been named after a very famous hunter.

Retaliatory killing used to be a common practice in the Indian Himalayas before the enactment of wildlife protection law in the 70s. Retaliatory killing would take place when a snow leopard would kill the domesticated animal. It could be a sheep, goat, cow, horses or baby donkeys. A snow leopard attack can make a lot of damage. For instance, if the cat enters the pen, it can kill in a single strike a dozen sheep and goats.

When a snow leopard was killed, it was killed by the local villagers. It would be through stoning, beating with a stick, or the animal would be shot with a powder gun. And as a mean to prevent attacks, snow leopards would also sometimes be killed if they were seen roaming around the village. And essentially, snow leopards were considered vermin.

Tsewang Norbu who’s aged 54 years old from Ulley Village in Ladakh, recalls his grandfather telling stories about how the killing of predators like wolves or snow leopard would often be an occasion to celebrate with Chhang, which is the local beer. Retaliatory killing seems to have persisted, probably not wide in scale. For many years, even after the introduction of the legislation that renders such and such acts illegal and severely punishable. In fact, when I was doing field work in Ladakh in 2013, a woman from Ang Village had lost, a few weeks before my arrival, nine sheep and goats, and one ox calf to a snow leopard attack. She had managed to trap the animal in her shed. And it's only because, as she explained, it was an auspicious day on the Tibetan calendar that she was able to convince the men of the village not to kill the animal.

If you wonder how it's even possible to trap a snow leopard, this was according to the elderly woman, “a very easy task as the beast was drunk on blood.” This is a belief that people have - that after attacking multiple prey, the snow leopard really tends to be a bit in a sluggish state. There is a belief that this is because of the animal is being intoxicated by the consumption of excessive blood. So this is usually how retaliatory killing is quite easy. Overall, this does not appear to be an isolated incident. We have collected similar stories in both Ladakh and Spiti.

The factor that seemed to in part inhibit people from killing the snow leopard for a long time (in this account) is the awareness that should the forest guard or the wildlife department become aware of it, they would face severe punishment. But I will get back to this.

It also used to be common practice to steal the kill of a snow leopard, something that has become very prohibited with wildlife protection rules. A snow leopard typically does not consume its kill entirely in one sitting. Instead, it may roam and return to its kill multiple times. And for Himalayan villagers, this provides an easy access to meat without the effort of hunting and also outweigh the risk associated with the more traceable act of hunting when it's illegal. In fact, so while this practice seems to have diminished today, accounts collected also indicate that it persisted for some time even after the new legislation. Many interlocutors describe this behaviour as simple greed for meat, as they would put it.

But another man, Tsewang Norbu, from Ulley offers another perspective on this practice. He is explaining that when a kill was brought to the village, people made sure that not even a drop of blood was spilled and that not a piece of meat was left for the snow leopard. And as he explains, once they get used to it, that killing easily accessible prey in the vicinity of the village, they would often come back to the village and kill more animals.

Finally, there are derogatory terms that people in the Ladakh would use to refer to the snow leopard in the past is testimony of an antagonistic relationship. We've collected a lot of these terms, but basically the snow leopard was, in the past, referred to by all of this language like "marangmo", which refers to women in a village who is described as woman of a foolish behaviour. Another one is "lanchat". They would say, you look like a lanchat, which refers to a piece of cloth used in the old times to patch or repair a torn or damaged wound dress.

Another one they would say to the snow leopard is "son chatchas," which is like wishing that you will die while walking all of a sudden. Another one is "shrut butchas," which is wishing for an animal to run out of energy, but it's also something that describes if your skin is peeling away from your bone like when you burn your fingers, and this is something that they would also wish for the snow leopard. Yet another is "sop gyangskan tsog," which refers to you look like a stuffed animal, and I'll refer back to this stuffed animal. Finally, they would sometimes wish that someone could come to the village and kill the snow leopard directly because people were no longer allowed to do this.

Yes, I'll come back to these stuffed animals very soon [slide on-screen shows two images of stuffed/taxidermied snow leopards hanging from a ceiling]. But, more than the sporadic retaliatory killing done by local communities, what led to the massive decimation of the snow leopard population in the Indian Himalayas is the killing done by military personnel. Widespread wildlife hunting, particularly by the military, led to a significant habitat destruction and near extinction of several of India's notable wildlife species, including the snow leopards. Ladakh and Spiti are considered border areas in India, and both regions have a lot of military personnel posted. For a long time also, the SSB, which is a paramilitary force in India, which guards the border of India, was touring the villages to train villagers in using guns in case there would be

like an attack by a neighbouring country that is Pakistan or China. Some older interlocutor, remember, how during this training the whole place would become like a hunting ground.

The new rules regarding wildlife protection did not, however, change the pervading behaviour overnight. As I suggested, even like recently, retaliatory killing was still considered by some. In Kibber and Spiti, I was told of an account like this of a man who killed a snow leopard as a retaliatory measure and he had the wildlife forest guard in that state coming to his place and searching for the snow leopard's life skin, so people started to be very scared of that. Even in Kibber, people remember a collective fear when people started to throw away their guns because they really feared that they would be punished or accused of doing something. All of this new fear is really well illustrated by the discomfort with which people in Ladakh and Spiti discuss animal taxidermy like we can see on the slide picture here [slide on-screen shows two images of stuffed/taxidermied snow leopards hanging from a ceiling].

In both regions, a few taxidermied animals, or stuffed animals, are on display in monasteries. The rationale for this practice is not entirely clear to me. We can talk about this after I collect more information. But even the people who are in the village, it's not entirely clear to them why this was done before. Usually, this animal would be placed in the monastery and there's a lot of cases like this. Over the years I have collected examples of it, but not only of the snow leopard, there's also other animals that are on display like this.

What is interesting here is how these animals are increasingly being removed from where they are. An example of this would be the snow leopard in Tangyar in Ladakh. About 40 years ago, the animals stood outside the main entrance of the monastery - it said at that time that the villager had decided to kill the leopard because it was preying on the livestock. One day they gathered to drive the animal away and one villager hit the head of the animal with a stone. The animal died. They skinned the animal and they buried the body, but they stuffed the animal and placed it in the monastery. But 10 years ago, they did renovation in the monastery, they shifted the snow leopard to the kitchen and it's not entirely clear, but it vanished.

Also, in Spiti, the snow leopard which was on display there (the first one on the left that we see in the picture) [referring to the image on the left of the slide on-screen displaying two images of stuffed/taxidermied snow leopards hanging from a ceiling], it was asked by the forest department to the villagers of Kumik Village that they removed the snow leopard and they hide this. There are different reason for this, according to the villagers, but there's this idea that people should not be seen as people who are killing animals that are endangered. So this is an example of this. But also there is certainly, arguably, the reframing of practices related to the treatment of animals that may play a role, in sort of the unease of my interlocutor when discussing derogatory term hunting, retaliatory killing and all of these material artifacts like the taxidermied animals.

This could be due as well to the prevailing discourse by Buddhist leaders that some practices that are performed by Buddhists should be erased. We can think of the call in 2006 by the 14th Dalai Lama for Tibetans to cease wearing clothes lined with animal skin, including snow leopard skin. This led to the massive destruction of pelts. So it could be an example of this. Overall,

these interventions have the effect of producing new subjects who do not engage in harmful behaviour with animals.

I am jumping now to tourism to explain some of these new behaviours. In the interest of time, I'm brushing a very quick picture here to describe how this business has developed independently in both Ladakh and Spiti in the Indian Himalayas. In Spiti, this tourism started around 2010, and in Ladakh, it would be more roughly 20 years ago.

The development of snow leopard watching tourism in both regions goes hand in hand with conservation efforts. In Ladakh tourism first started to develop in Hemis National Park. Over the years, various organizations have endeavoured to ensure that villagers within the park share some of the benefits of conserving vulnerable species.

In Ladakh, there was first the Himalayan Homestays Program, which was initiated in 2000 with the financial support of the Mountain Institute of the UNESCO. Its objective was to involve villagers in tourism initiative that are advantageous for both local communities and snow leopards. Locally, the program involved the Department of Wildlife Protection and the Snow Leopard Conservancy of India Trust. They contributed to the training of participants in the fundamentals of hospitality and they provided essential items such as blankets, plates, silverware, and other necessary supplies so that they could accommodate guests who were visiting.

There was also this system that they developed to make sure that everybody benefits. There is a rotational system, so each homestay will, if tourists are coming to the village, like it's turn-wise, right? Like you will host this group of tourists and the following day it's going to be your neighbour and so on and so forth. In the past decades, and a bit more past decade, snow leopard lodges have opened here and there in Ladakh.

This is the village of Kibber in Spiti [slide on-screen displays an image of the village located on a hill with many flat-topped, white houses], where a system of homestays has also developed, but it didn't receive the same support from the same organizations, but still villagers have organized these various spaces. There's none of these large lodges like the ones developing in the Ladakh in Spiti.

The literature on the development of snow leopard watching tourism tends to focus on how it aligns with ecotourism as it involves local communities through homestay infrastructure. The financial benefit that communities earn from this new opportunity is generally presented as the only incentive for snow leopard conservation. But what remains underexplored, I argue, are the feelings and emotion in which this evolving relationship with the snow leopard is enmeshed.

With this project, I am exploring the concept of domestication to eliminate the effective dimension of snow leopard tourism in the Indian Himalayas and its transformative effect on some resident in areas where this industry is thriving. Domestication refers to the process of domesticating or the state of being domesticated. To domesticate means to cause a wild animal

to be able to live or work with humans. It generally describes the human influence over the reproduction, habitat and behaviour of an entire species.

Anthropologists have, however, shown that the wild/domesticated binary requires nuances when subject to cross-cultural analysis. But here I do not focus on local interpretation of wild versus domesticated animal and whether a shift has occurred with snow leopard tourism. I'm taking the idea of domestication as a heuristic device, and I'm building on the work of anthropologists and social scientists who are thinking through an analytical framework that reveals the reciprocal influence of the domestication process. So specifically, they highlight how non-human species also play a role in shaping human behaviour, history and environment.

In other words, domestication is a two-way street, and what I'm interested in this presentation is how humans are transformed by the snow leopard amidst the development of a niche tourism that focuses on this elusive animal. Domestication is generally defined by control and mastery. According to ethologist Vinciane Despret, it may be due to our lack of a solid theory of attachment that we think of domestication as mastery and she proposes considering alternative concepts to domestication and suggests thinking through the idea of attunement between human and animals.

So, whether the snow leopard itself is transformed in the process is not a journey on which I'm embarking here, but we can discuss this later because the snow leopard spotters have their ideas about that. This is another image of a snow leopard watching [image on-screen displays a line of people on top of a cliff looking for snow leopards].

A crucial place to understand the attunement between local resident and the snow leopard is in the development of an expertise at tracking the animal. So as mentioned, the snow leopard is notoriously difficult to see, earning the name of “the ghost of the mountain.” The snow leopard camouflage is perfectly well in the rocky landscape where it roams. Snow leopard spotting is a craft that developed because of the need brought by tourism. In both Ladakh and Spiti, the first dedicated spotters were initially trained through interaction with wildlife biologists working with NGOs such as the Snow Leopard Conservancy Trust or the Nature Conservation Foundation in Spiti.

These men would know well the territory surrounding their village and would sometimes be hired as helpers and porters by biologists on their expedition. In following biologists, eventually these men learned about the techniques of spotting and to use the equipment to spot. Another were hired and trained directly by NGOs to monitor the snow leopard population around their village. Of course, in village, you would always have some individuals who have always been better than others at spotting wildlife due to a keen interest or because of the skills they develop while keeping a watch for predators when spending long days in the pasture with sheep and goat. So you have these spotters here – I’m going to shift to a video very soon [image on-screen displays a mountainous background with a spotter sitting in a chair with his telescope in front of them].

These spotters initially played a central role in the development of snow leopard tourism - through their skills, visitors could get a glimpse at the elusive cat. They continue to play this role today and they also train younger generation.

For this project, we interviewed thus far seven spotters ranging from 24 to 67 years old and who have between a few years to more than two decades of experience at spotting. Yes, here is Tsewang Norbu, a famous spotter who is explaining the behaviour of the snow leopard with his cat, and he's explaining that he's doing this like his father was explaining to him when he was younger [image on-screen displays Tswewang sitting cross-legged in his home petting his cat]. All the spotters that we interviewed for this project agree on one thing: to be a good spotter requires patience and perseverance. But first and foremost, you need calmness, a quiet mind, and passion.

The art of spotting snow leopard involves a mix of skills and intuition. A spotter will typically start his day early in the morning, around 6:30 a.m. or 7 when the snow leopard is active at preying. Spotters will observe through the day without missing the time before sundown when the animals are the most active again.

To become an accomplished spotter, having an interest in the animal is fundamental, but not enough. One must know the surrounding area very well and understand the snow leopard's territory. A good spotter will know the snow leopard's territory and the path it follows during the day and at what time of the day it's moving around. As much as possible, you must know in which area the snow leopard is, whether it has crossed the path or not, whether it went towards the marshland and so on.

It also helps to be able to distinguish between the individuals roaming around the area, but this is really not something easy. You also must understand by looking at its behaviour whether a snow leopard is hungry or not. When prolonged period without sighting occur, spotters strategically plan their next move, often deciding to explore new areas or on previous experience of encounters. Those are some of the clues that snow leopard spotters are following.

A good spotter must constantly stay alert and with good observation and understanding of the animal's movement, it's sometimes possible to predict when a snow leopard and where it might reappear. As Tsewang Norbu explains, the most important thing is that you must understand the behaviour of the snow leopard, where they live, how they live, how they eat, how they attack wildlife and their timing for hunting. He also emphasizes the importance of learning the methods, which includes the observation using binoculars and the scope.

In following the prey, one can also find a snow leopard because you have to understand how the snow leopard is hunting. A snow leopard keenly observes its prey, usually waiting patiently in cover until an opportunity arises. After successfully capturing their prey, snow leopards rest for about 10-15 minutes to recover from the exertion before starting to consume their meal. This is the perfect time to bring the tourist for observation, as once there is a kill, the snow leopard will stay in the surrounding for some time and even return to consume the flesh time and again in the following hours and day.

Snow leopard spotters have different techniques. It involves following the paw marks like this [image on-screen displays two images of paw prints marked in the snow], but also sometimes when they see the paw mark, they will know the direction. Another thing which helps is to trace the scratch mark that the leopards leave or smell the scent mark they are spraying on the rocks. Sorry, I'm trying to put the video here, it doesn't seem… oh yes, it's working. In this video you can see a spotter here showing how he's doing his work [video on-screen shows a spotter walking and pointing at the ground when identifying marks].

Spotters will agree that to spot, one must also follow their intuition. Some days, Morup Tsewang feels a strong sense that he may spot a snow leopard and occasionally his instincts are rewarded. Spotters are well aware that the experience of tourists who have come from all over the world often spending a lot of money depends a great deal on their effort and their expertise, yet some spotters believe that there is a limit to what their expertise can offer. For Morup Tsewang, if some tourists cannot see the snow leopard, it's simply a question of karma. "Some tourists don't have a good karma," he explains. So by the time a spotter locates a snow leopard, the tourist may come to the site and they are not able to get a glimpse at the animal, which might be gone. It really is something, it is an activity that has sort of like morphed into the local spirituality.

Snow leopard spotters come to their craft for a different reason, including the desire to earn money, but no matter the reason to be a good snow leopard spotter, one must be passionate about the animal. According to Sushil Dorjey, those who don't have it and don't do it from their heart--without passion, simply do not last. Spotting a snow leopard is a bit like finding a needle in a haystack, spending hours and hours scrutinizing the horizon with binoculars or a spotting scope requires tremendous endurance and perseverance. It's also painful for the eyes to scan with these instruments for extended period of time. Overall, spotters have trained themselves and developed an expertise and a kind of familiarity with the animal. When a sighting occurs, it's generally an event that brings overwhelming feeling of joy for a spotter.

The interest in the snow leopard extends beyond just the spotter. When someone spots a snow leopard, whether while heading to the pasture or in the vicinity of the village, it's common practice to inform local spotters, and this is often done with great enthusiasm.

More than 10 years ago, when I was conducting research for my PhD near Ulley in Ladakh, there was a genuine frenzy when a snow leopard roamed the area, making several attacks on domesticated animals over the course of many days. This situation really created a mix of fear as people remain on high alert and they were carefully monitoring their animals and their pen throughout the night. But there was also a feeling of intrigue. The cell phone would ring quickly every time somebody spotted an animal they would send pictures.

While the fear for the animals still prevail, there is a clear broadening of the register of emotion generated by the sight of a small leopard, as Morup Tsewang explained, "There was a time in the village when everybody would say that the snow leopard is bad, that it's not nice, and then they would use some ugly words against the snow leopard. But now with time change, things change and the source of income from the snow leopard started coming. More and more

tourists are now coming. So, the attitude has just become the opposite. So, everybody started appreciating snow leopards, seeing snow leopard and all this. Often many people in the village tell, 'if you find a snow leopard, please let us know. We want to see the snow leopard. We want to take picture.'"

In the words of Paldan Tundup from Kibber Village, "there was a time when we would go around and if it was an area where the snow leopard is, we would put a bell on the horse to scare the snow leopard and we would throw stones and shout to have the snow leopard run away. Now there is nobody to do this because there are many people coming to see this snow leopard."

Close encounters with snow leopard continued to instill fearful emotion, but today the animal is no longer primarily wrapped in negative emotion. This is well captured by the experience of Sonam Lobsang from Kibber, who's 24 years old and starting to train as a snow leopard spotter. His first encounter with a snow leopard took place when he was young and was a very frightful one. But this encounter also led him to cultivate an interest in the animal.

He is explaining, "the first time I saw a snow leopard is when I was studying, 7th or 8th standard, when the neighbour told me to go get the meat of the sheep, the neighbour would have seen the kill and he asked him to take the meat. Then we could not find the meat. We could see that the dead body had been carried by the snow leopard and the body was hiding in a cliff. I followed the trail and then there was about two three meter gap between me and the snow leopard and I got so scared that I ran away, and the snow leopard ran away as well. I was 14-15 years old at that time. After that, whenever I would go to the jungle (which means the pasture), I was curious to see the snow leopard. But that first time I thought I'm dead today. I was scared. Those were the times when there was no wildlife tourist and then slowly that tourism started."

Today, Sonam Lobsang is an emerging spotter and appreciates each snow leopard sighting. He describes one of these encounters quite poetically: "One time I went to our Gette side for scanning, and it was snowing a bit, and I saw the snow leopard coming. And the way the snow leopard was coming, not fully clear in the snow, that was the best moment in my life. I was just standing there, the snow leopard is coming towards me and moving slowly, looking at me, and went on the side, and I was looking at him. We had an eye-to-eye contact."

Later, he explains how he really likes photography and taking pictures and he would have loved to capture that magic moment, "Over the years, I'm feeling for the snow leopard grew from raw fear to fascination."

I am concluding here. I have thus far suggested that the emergence of snow leopard tourism in the Indian Himalaya is reshaping the relationship between human and snow leopard by transforming the animal from a feared predator into a valued and familiar presence within local communities. As tourism grows and the pastoral economy declines, local perception of the snow leopard shift driven not only by economic incentive but also by evolving emotion and curiosity.

I would like to conclude with a reflection on a tension that is however emerging today with the changing economy in the villages of the Indian Himalayas. There has been in the past two decades an important decline in the pastoral activities in the villages of Ladakh and Spiti, in particular when it comes to keeping sheep and goats. There are several reasons for that, and the main one is the lack of workforce available with younger generations studying outside or taking paid employment in cities. There is also a general lack of interest among younger generation for agro-pastoral activities, something that concerns older generation. When youth are going to the pasture with the sheep and goats, they don't have an interest and they look at their phone instead of looking at the snow leopard, lamented a man following an attack in Kibber. And this is how attack happens.

Tsewang Norbu sees a connection between changing attitude and the well-being of the snow leopard. According to the spotter, there was once a strong interconnection between human and wildlife in the region. In his view, the only way to protect snow leopard is to maintain domesticated animal, particularly sheep and goats. As he explains, "if you keep sheep and goats, even if the snow leopard gets a chance to eat just one sheep a year, this is how we humans benefit the wildlife, particularly snow leopards." This is especially important, he believes for older leopards who rely on domesticated animal as a source of food. However, he argues that this interconnection between human and wildlife has been broken and as a result, snow leopard no longer live as long as they did. And for the few who continue to keep sheep and goats against all odds, the snow leopard remains a threat rather than a subject of fascination.

While those who lose animals to snow leopard attack generally tend to view this in the term described by Tsewang Norbu, such incidents often mark a turning point, prompting farmers to sell their livestock and put an end to their pastoral activity. Moreover, from the wisdom of their old age, elders sometimes used snow leopard tourism with concern.

As Paldan Tundup from Kibber puts it, reflecting on how the younger generation placed all their fate in this new economy while losing interest in farming and pastoralism, "You never know whether the snow leopard might stay or leave." This is an emerging concern in Kibber Spiti as a military camp is being built right in what is known as the Snow Leopard Corridor, despite the community's effort to oppose the project.

That's it. I will stop sharing the screen.

Dr. Faisal Moola:

Thank you so much, Karine. That was absolutely fascinating.

[End of transcript]