

Annexure 2.1

Tibet - The End of the Tiger Trail *by Belinda Wright*

It has now become clear that Tibet and other nearby regions of China are the biggest markets for tiger, leopard and otter skins smuggled from India. In the markets of Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, tiger, leopard and otter skins can be seen openly for sale sown onto Tibetan costumes called *chubas*. Fresh tiger and leopard skins can also be found for sale in Lhasa, and a large number of leopard and snow leopard skins are being openly sold on the streets of Linxia. The skin *chubas* are worn by Tibetan people, mainly from Kham, at their festivals in Tibet and adjoining Sichuan.

These are the findings of a survey which was carried out in August 2005 by a UK-based NGO, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), and the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI). It confirms earlier reports - notably in October 2003 when China's Anti-Smuggling Bureau seized a truck in the Tibet Autonomous Region containing 31 tiger, 581 leopard and 778 otter skins from India. In an earlier survey in May 2004, the EIA found whole fresh leopard skins for sale in Lhasa.

In August, we found that the open sale and use of fresh tiger, leopard and otter skins is now even more widespread. All the dealers that we talked to said the skins had come from India, and most of the Tibetans wearing them said that they had purchased the skins in the past 18 months. The skin *chubas* are only worn twice a year, at local horse festivals - where we witnessed dancers, horse riders, visitors, and even organisers and officials, wearing skins - and at the Tibetan New Year.

In Lhasa, we found an alarming increase in the number of shops that were openly selling tiger and leopard skin *chubas*, compared to the 2004 survey. Out of 46 shops selling skins in the main Barkhor circuit, 10 stocked a total of 24 tiger skin *chubas*, and 20 had 54 leopard skin *chubas*. The other shops sold otter skins and *chubas*, and fox skins and hats. We were also shown three fresh tiger skins priced at from RMB 50,000 to 100,000 (approx. Rs. 2,69,000 to 5,38,000) and seven fresh leopard skins by dealers in Lhasa, all of which were said to be from India. It appears that the shop keepers buy their skins from middlemen and "wholesalers".

In Linxia, we saw a staggering number of leopard, snow leopard, otter, fox, wolf, and domestic cat skins being openly sold in Bai Ta Je street. In the 70 shops we surveyed, we found over 30 snow leopard skins (from both China and India) and over 100 fresh leopard skins - with many more skins rolled up in the backs of the shops ready for supplementary cleaning and tanning.

We were told by the sellers and wearers that the Tibetan *chuba* is exempt from the law, even if it is adorned with an entire tiger skin. In Linxia, traders told us that in the Hui Autonomous Prefecture of Gansu Province, there is a "special policy" that allows them openly to sell skins. Many people also claimed that skins on *chubas* is "traditional",

although when questioned further they admitted that neither their fathers nor grandfathers had worn skin *chubas*.

The information collected by the EIA/WPSI team, including smuggling methods that we were told about from dealers, has been passed on to the Chinese authorities. The survey confirms without doubt that there is large-scale poaching of tigers and leopards in India whose skins are smuggled to Tibet. This grave issue must be immediately addressed by all concerned governments and conservationists if the tiger and the leopard are to have any future in the wild.





Where has the Indian Tiger Gone?





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