

Nepal children to track snow leopard

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Experts believe just 500 adults survive in the Himalayan nation, and few can claim ever to have seen the secretive, solitary "mountain ghost", which lives 5,000 to 6,000 metres (16,500 to 20,000 ft) above sea level.

"Snow leopards are inherently rare, and also elusive in the sense that they are active during dusk and dawn, so few people, including biologists, have seen a snow leopard to date," said Som Ale of the US-based Snow Leopard Conservancy.

The group has enlisted children from schools in the leopard's habitat in Mustang, in Nepal's mountainous northern frontier, who will work in pairs to instal and monitor digital cameras to count the endangered species.

The census, due to be carried out over two months in winter, will give scientists a more accurate idea of numbers in Nepal than more primitive techniques, including recording tracks and collecting droppings.

Although the Snow Leopard Conservancy used camera traps on a study in India six years ago, the group says this is the first survey of a large predator anywhere in the world by local communities who are not paid conservation experts.

"In parts of Africa, lions may be monitored by local people but they are well paid professional guides," Ale told AFP.

The pupils will be trained to set up digital cameras that take infra-red images and operate in sub-zero temperatures to areas where snow leopards would be expected to visit.

[Computer programmers](#) will then use each animal's unique pelt to create to estimate the number of snow leopards.

The [snow leopard](#) is protected in Nepal by an act of parliament dating back to the 1970s which provides for penalties of up to 100,000 rupees (\$1,300) and up to 15 years in jail for [poachers](#).

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