

CU biologist aiding China to prevent loss of wildlife

By HARALD STROMME
For the Camera

When over 1 billion people live in one country, the threat to wildlife is extreme.

Wild animals such as the Chinese tiger and the snow leopard have disappeared from large areas of China, and there is a growing concern about the possible loss of other animals.

"The Chinese government is trying to write national legislation to protect their wildlife," said Jim Halfpenny, a University of Colorado research associate and biologist who went to China to study the wildlife last summer. "Hopefully, we will be able to help them out by providing some facts."

Halfpenny spent two and a half months in China as a participant in a Sino-American wildlife expedition into the mountains of western China. His trip was funded by the American Ecological Union, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C.

The expedition, which had been in the planning stage for six years, focused on the Tibet-Qinghai plateau, an area the size of Montana.

The "Joint Sino-American Expedition" was named "A Journey into a Mysterious Region" by the Chinese, a title that turned out to be appropriate.

"It is the highest plateau in the world and it's extremely dry there. In one basin, it's 60 miles between each plant, and less than 1 inch of rain a year," said Halfpenny, who lives in a trailer in Boulder and was selected for the expedition because of his expertise in tracking.

Halfpenny, author of "A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in Western America," which was published last summer, studied the wildlife with six other Americans and some 20 Chinese.

China has a long list of endangered species. Tigers and leopards are almost extinct, and the wild yak, Tibetan wolf, argali sheep, blue sheep and Chinese grizzly bear are rare, Halfpenny noted.

"We saw some of these animals out in the wild, but the big cats and the bears were only in the markets; their skins and paws are very popular," he said.

"There are probably 300 Chinese tigers left in the world, and I saw two skins for sale."

Using horses to get around in the Chinese mountains proved to be a problem — not for the Americans, but for the Chinese.

"They are definitely not an outdoors people," Halfpenny said with a smile. "And they are so enthusiastic, it caused us a lot of trouble."

The enthusiasm almost led to tragedy. The Chinese, who were inexperienced with horses, insisted on packing the animals for a five-day trip.

Refusing to accept advice from the Americans, one Chinese youngster galloped away with an entire load on one side of the horse.

"He got 50 yards before the horse panicked and threw him off," Halfpenny said. "He landed straight on his face, and could easily have broken his neck."

Later that day, a Mongol guide led them directly into a two-mile swamp. "My horse sank in to the belly seven times," Halfpenny recalled. "The horse gave up, and we had to carry the luggage ourselves, and pull the horse out of the mud."

This kind of "Chinese rodeo" made the expedition a "hi-



Camera staff photo by Karen Schulenburg

CHINA MEMORIES: Jim Halfpenny, above, a University of Colorado research associate and biologist who went to China on an expedition to study endangered wildlife, has a flag representing the joint Sino-American scientific effort. While in China, Halfpenny photographed Chinese tiger skins he found for sale in markets, top right; there are only 300 known Chinese tigers left in the world. Halfpenny photographed a skull of a rare argali sheep found in the desert, at right.

larious but scary adventure," Halfpenny said.

But there was a very serious side to the trip. The 39-year-old biologist is deeply concerned about the prospects for saving the endangered animals.

"It should be possible (to save them)," he said. "Actually, it seems like it would be easier in a Communist country; I mean they have the best birth control system in the world, so they should be able to manage this."

Although some of the animals are killed by the natives for
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food, it's the organized mass-hunting that is threatening them.

The wild blue sheep, for instance, is in real danger, Halfpenny said. Only two years ago, the government killed 1,700 and sold them to Europe as meat.

In Nepal, rich hunters are willing to pay \$8,000 for a license to shoot one of these sheep.

"If the Chinese government sold 15 such licenses, they would make as much money as they got from killing the 1,700," Halfpenny said. "That's the kind of changes we have to see in China."

Even though the Boulder scientist was thrilled by the wildlife in China, he was equally fascinated by the Chinese society.

"The behavioral changes that humans make, living 1 billion of

them together, are impressive," Halfpenny said. "They are so used to being close together that they will come up to you, stop only 4 inches away and stare you in the eyes. It's annoying at first, but after a while you learn to just stare back."

Halfpenny said he also learned a great deal about the Chinese government. Communist party liaisons in the expedition constantly watching the scientists, and there was other evidence of the government keeping watch.

"I wish everybody could live under that system for a couple of months to see how it really is," he said. "That way, you would learn to appreciate what we have here."

The research biologist thinks the expedition was successful in documenting the area's wildlife, but the work should continue.

