

Lifestyles



FRANK KIMMEL/Rocky Mountain News

Research biologist Jim Halfpenny took this slide of a truckload of gold miners during a trip to China last summer to study the country's endangered animal

A wild time in CHINA

Boulder biologist sees animal crisis

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BOULDER — Jim Halfpenny, a research biologist at the University of Colorado, was once up to his neck in quicksand and got out of it OK, so this time he wasn't too worried about the wok-fried cow's feet and camel's tendons, and the pig's tongue and the other tidbits bobbing in his dinner bowl. When East meets West along Marco Polo's ancient mountain route through China, now a country of

a billion people, you eat what you can. "The caterpillars," Halfpenny says, "were kind of chewy and salty."

Halfpenny went to China in late summer as part of a rare Sino-American scientific expedition to study endangered animals, and he wound up eating some of them. He understands the irony of that, but he knows that in the collision between people and animals on a crowded planet, the animals usually lose. Nowhere is that loss more evident than in China, the world's most populous country.

"China is the first country in the world that has had to manage a billion people, one-fifth of the population of the world," Halfpenny says. "We found nice animal populations, but we had to go to the most remote places in China to find them. Everywhere else, the animals have disappeared at incredible rates because of the human population."

HALFPENNY'S biological research has taken him from Africa to Antarctica, and he has seen the effects of a world population that has grown by almost 100 million people in the past year. "I've worked in Somalia, and I saw kids there that I knew would be dead in a week," he says. "But everybody I saw in China had some meat on their bones. China is a poor country, but it is not a starving country. The Chinese have figured out how to feed a billion people."

Halfpenny, 39, lives alone in a trailer in Boulder. He leans back in a chair in his book-crowded office and thinks about a 28-year-old Mongol man who lives alone in a tent in the high-plateau country of western China. The man cooked a mutton feast for the visiting scientists just before they left for home in September.

"He killed a sheep and cooked everything except the skull and the hooves, and we ate it all," Halfpenny says. "We had stomach and we had intestines full of blood made into blood pudding."

And then he smiles, and the smile lacks only a toothpick. "I mean every bit of that animal was eaten and gone in three hours," he says. "China's cooking has evolved as a way to make use of everything. When they kill an animal,

they use most of it — feet, tongue, tendons, anything that can possibly be eaten."

HALFPENNY digs through a box of photo slides from the China expedition, and finds one picture he took in the marketplace of a small village. It is a picture of two dark, dead, detached objects with hair and claws.

"These are grizzly feet, grizzly bear," the scientist says, referring to what most people call the Asian brown bear. "We got the vendor down to \$16 a foot. That's a lot of money over there. They're a delicacy and they're used for medicine, somehow. They grind them up. And there aren't many grizzlies left."

In other markets, the Americans found the meat and hides of Chinese tigers, snow leopards and river otter, all rare, and black bear, wolves, monkeys, fox, desert cats, lynx, plus a lot of antlers, which are ground into powder for medical and ritualistic use.

In an effort to protect its wildlife, the Chinese government invited the U.S. scientists into China to learn western ecological techniques. The seven Americans and 23 Chinese on the Sino-American Tibet-Qinghai Survey of Endangered Mammals sighted 36 species, six of which Halfpenny puts in the threatened or rare category — the wild yak wild ass (donkey), the Tibetan wolf, blue sheep, Argali sheep and musk deer.

"The musk deer stand two feet high," Halfpenny says. "They don't have horns. They've got tusks about two inches long. And they've got a musk gland down in the belly that perfume is made from. The musk sac sells for about \$750 so they've been heavily hunted and they're very rare."

The wild yak, a huge, dark beast that stands six feet tall at the shoulder, towers over the musk deer, but it, too is threatened by man. The scientists saw a herd of 400 wild yak in a remote 14,000-foot-high, 70-mile-long valley in the Kunlun Mountains, and the Americans named it Yak Valley. A wild yak measures 65 inches across on the horns and weighs more than a ton. "When the herd goes by, the ground rumbles underneath you," Halfpenny says.

"It must have been like a herd of buffalo back in the 1800s in Kansas."

The plains of the American Midwest were once black with buffalo, but the animals were slaughtered by the thousands and almost driven to extinction. Halfpenny says many of China's endangered species face a similar fate unless the government adopts modern wildlife and hunting management policies.

One of the policies Halfpenny suggests would inject a dose of capitalism into China. "What you can do is go to a valley and find the biggest, meanest guy there. You tell him that you're going to pay him about \$30 this year to protect the animals in the valley. That \$30 is a lot to him, so you've got your wildlife protected."

Halfpenny says the University of Montana already has set up an exchange program to train Chinese scientists to do more thoughtfully what any big, mean guy could do. And the Chinese have signed another wildlife management agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Sino-American expedition from July 25 to Sept. 28 was funded by private donations to the American Ecological Union, a non-profit corporation in Washington, D.C., that hopes to continue to work with the Chinese next year and beyond.

ONE purpose of this summer's trip was to collect animals, including some of the endangered species, for mounting in museums. Therefore, a taxidermist went along. "Everything we shot, we ate," Halfpenny says. "We took seven blue sheep for a family mount in the Chinese museum. Those were all wok-fried."

Halfpenny was selected for the expedition because of his understanding of animal behavior and his knowledge of tracking. His book, *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in Western America*, was published this summer.

"To me, the greatest thing in the world is the diversity that we find in plants and animals," Halfpenny says. "Once that diversity is lost, we can't ever get it back. There will never be another passenger pigeon. In a few years, there will probably never be another condor. Once a species goes extinct, you can't ever create it again."

A biologist went to China to study the animals and was most affected by the people.

"These are the things I grew up with — the romantic names, the Kunlun Mountains, the Tsai-dam Desert, stories out of Marco Polo, the forbidden country, China," Halfpenny says. "A white person has never done that before, the trip we did."

Halfpenny remembers the old Mongol guide who worried about him on a horseback trip 15,000 feet up a mountain. "I got off the horse to rest a minute, and he comes over to me, real close and real worried, and he starts thumping his chest to ask me if my heart was beating fast. Was the altitude getting to me? Was I having a heart attack? I said, 'No, no, no, it's my knees.' I gave him some beautiful wool mittens when I left."

Halfpenny remembers a country of contrasts. Eastern China: "You don't see a space that isn't used — house, house, house, crop, crop, crop, house, house, house." Western China: "This is right off the edge of the Gobi Desert. You could literally go 60 miles between plants." And he remembers a nation of walls. The people: "They have blank faces." The politicians: "It's 1984 happening right there, right now."

BUT China is coming alive, Halfpenny says. "They are coming out of this heavy suppression from communism, but what's tradition to these people? In 1959, there were 1,600 Tibetan monasteries, and now there are 10. Where's the culture gone?"

In China, 80% of the people are involved in agriculture. Over there they have turned the farmer into a national hero. Over here we are letting the farmer die off.

And over here, a scientist's small office at the University of Colorado's Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research would house an entire Chinese family. Over there, because of a population of a billion people, the Chinese government enforces mandatory birth control, limiting a woman to one child.

"We couldn't cross that boundary here in the United States," Halfpenny says. "On the other hand, they watch you in China. They control you. I wish everybody could live that way for two months, and they would appreciate what they've got here."

What Halfpenny has here is guts. He has worked for 22 years with Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School, and he has taught thousands of people to take care of themselves. "This is an old question I used to use: 'If I dumped you out in the middle of the ocean, how long would you live?'" He waits for a moment to let you



Trucks carrying gold miners became stuck in a river in the barren high-plateau country of western China.



JIM HALFPENNY/Special to the New

A vendor, left, in the marketplace of a small Chinese village displays his wares, including bear and monkey feet, snake skins, dried lizards, herbs and spices, lichens and animal antlers. The feet of an Asian brown bear, also called a grizzly, above, sell for about \$16 each. Because of indiscriminate hunting and trapping, Halfpenny says, China is selling the future of its wildlife and forcing many animals to extinction.

think about it.

"There are four answers," he says, finally. "There are those that can't put any time limit on it. There are those that will say, 'Oh, I can tread water for an hour or two.' There are those that would just give up immediately. I've spent my life teaching people to come up with the answer, 'I'll be treading water when I die.' The point is, they would still be trying at the end."

It was on another expedition to Greenland 10 years ago that Halfpenny sank up to his neck in quicksand. He saved himself with what he had learned as a boy, when he spent a lot of time alone in the wilds of Wyoming. He calmly turned over and, inch by inch, crawled out of the quicksand.

ON the China trip, Halfpenny had to contend with a hard-drinking Communist liaison officer who kept getting the expedition lost, plus some pig's tongue and camel's tendon and a caterpillar or two bobbing in his dinner bowl.

And then there was *mai tai*, the Chinese liquor that was the worst stuff Halfpenny had ever swallowed. He says in China people don't smile much unless it's a *mai tai* smile.

"The Chinese in our group were some heavy drinkers," he says. "The scientists told us that essentially, there's not a lot to look forward to. They said, 'We're often happy when we're drinking together, and we share happy moments that way. So we drink.' There's not a lot of joy in China."