

The Skin Shops

Anne Wright

Last year the Indian Government imposed a total ban on the export of tiger and leopard skins, and goods made from such skins. Also all the Indian states banned tiger shooting – none too soon – and possibly too late, for the latest census figures suggest that tigers may now have dropped as low as 1500 for the whole of India. In this article, written in the first place for the *Junior Statesman* in India, Anne Wright, our FPS correspondent in India and a member of the Cat Group of the Survival Service Commission, who lives in Calcutta, describes what she saw on several visits to the back streets of Calcutta. This explains one of the biggest drains on tigers and leopards in India.

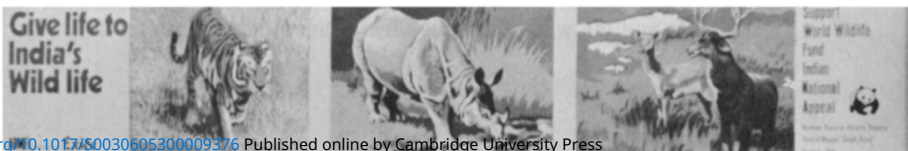
Twenty years ago we in India had roughly forty thousand tigers in our jungles; now the latest census says fifteen hundred. In those days of not so very long ago I remember it was considered 'non-U' to have a skin in the house unless someone in the family had shot it. Today the tiger skin is a decorator's gimmick splashed across the pages of *American House and Garden*, while the foreign lady with the leopard skin coat, if not a film star, is definitely from the upper income group. So this is where India's finest animals are to end their existence. In 1968 3000 skins were exported although there were only five hundred shooting licences. This suggests that the authorities concerned were unaware of, or turned a blind eye to the fact that at least 2000 animals were 'poached'. Our jungles have been denuded.

Skins have been my private nightmare, and the shops in Calcutta, where bleached fangs and the glimpse of gold and stripes on shelves make one's heart sicken, fill one with astonishment as to how they got there. 'Yes madam, we have rare clouded leopard; baby tigers cheaper, see this black leopard – very rare.' Government bans on shooting and export have been imposed, but still the skins mount up in the shops and are sold freely, even in Government-owned shops.

A friend and I went on a private expedition to investigate and landed up in a Calcutta back street in search of the places where the illegally sold skins come in. We acted the part of 'innocent' tourists, and going first to a small office on a second floor we met one of Calcutta's big dealers. He had been doing Rs 1 lakh* worth of business in tiger and leopard skins a month; now he admitted it was not so easy but he assured us there were ways and means. He promised a supply of 20 to 50 fresh tiger skins a month and to 'encourage' us showed us the uncured skin of a tiger, said to have come recently from the Sunderbunds. Brought in last week, he said, as we gazed sadly at this poached skin with the blood still clotted on its salted hide. We

*A lakh equals 10,000

Indian WWF Display Board *Anne Wright*



continued our search and were led by a small boy down a narrow lane in a busti area to a small room. On continuing the 'tourist act' we were escorted to a godown where, piled waist high was the largest collection of fresh leopard skins I had ever seen. Twenty-five uncured leopard skins, two clouded leopard skins, one tiger, while gruesome tufts of hair could be seen partly hidden by sacking on surrounding shelves. Asked where this incredible amount of animals had been killed the answers were evasive. Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, U P – all over India they said, and they promised a supply of over 200 fresh skins a month if we would only give the order. Thus small dealers make big money overnight, and the skin shops are the life-line of the illegal poacher, poisoning and trapping and shooting by spotlight.

Since that afternoon we have visited several dealers and in each place have been faced with the appalling sight of skins in piles. The 'innocent tourist' act was maintained with the help of a wig, beads and a pseudo Texan drawl. The latest visit was to a tannery on an eerie moonlit evening in a part of the world I would rather not have been at that time of night. The smell of the surrounding tanneries, the murky water tanks, the dark alleys and then the shed with the piles of skins, and the skulls heaped on shelves, completed the nightmare. As an 'innocent tourist' I enquired about the ban on export and was told that people often bought unmounted skins as they fold up into quite a small package and can be slipped into a suitcase amongst one's clothes. I was further assured that a Canadian had taken five tiger skins out by air the previous week. A large pile of bits of skin attracted our attention. 'Spoiled skins' they said, and it became clear that they were the skins from poisoned animals not recovered in time. Our horror mounted when we were shown skins of small cubs, and very immature animals. Anything goes for the poacher, for the price is only a few hundred less for a cub.

A ban on this open sale of illegally killed animals will have to come very soon if the tiger and leopard are to survive. In many places the leopard is considered to be in greater danger than the tiger, while the snow leopard, a Red Book species, is estimated at only 400 now surviving. Because of the snow leopard's value to furriers this beautiful animal is still unprotected in Kashmir where it is classed as 'vermin'.

Small wonder now that the Indian Board for Wildlife's Expert Committee writes of our wildlife, 'Unless a crash programme is implemented we cannot save it', while some scientists claim that the remaining tigers and leopards are now depleted to such an extent and exist in such isolated pockets that the breeds cannot maintain themselves and will soon be extinct.

Few people realise that in our vast country of over one-and-a-quarter million square miles, only 4,700 square miles are set aside for sanctuaries – a smaller area than the single sanctuary of Serengeti in East Africa, and even in these comparatively tiny areas international standards are not observed and cattle grazing and wood gathering are widely permitted. Outside the sanctuaries wild life is in great danger. For the most urgent reasons, economic, cultural, and aesthetic, our wildlife and the wild places they live in are in need of protection.



THE SKIN THEY ALL WANT *E.P. Gee*