1. Introduction

The tradition of wearing exotic animal skins has long symbolized the courageousness of heroes in Tibetan areas such as Amdo and Kham, where the people still have very strong blood bonds to the old Tibetan military, and this type of clothing has also long been worn in the Tibetan regions of Ngari and Nagchu. Historically, however, this has not been the case in Lhasa and Shigatse, where the wearing of leopard and tiger trimmed traditional garments only arose over the past several decades. While the wearing of sheepskin-lined clothing is a practical response to the extremely cold climate in Amdo and other areas of the Tibetan Plateau, in general the majority of these clothes are of simple design. However, until the past year top-quality sheepskin-lined outerwear, such as jackets and robes with silk or wool exterior shells, were often trimmed with leopard, tiger, and otter fur.

The widespread increase in the wearing of tiger, leopard, and otter trimmed garments in Tibet resulted from the rapid development of the Tibetan economy, which has not only improved the standard of living for many Tibetans, but also increased the economic and cultural interaction between different regions of Tibet. Consequently, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the regional fashion trend of wearing traditional Tibetan garments trimmed with exotic furs spread throughout the Tibetan cultural area. Over the last 25 years it has been possible to see thousands of Tibetans wearing otter, leopard, and tiger skins during large festivals, in what appear at times to be large gatherings of endangered animals. Recently, the appeal of these traditional-style garments reached the point where almost everyone who had the economic means to do so purchased one. Over the past five to six years, during big festivals and holidays, celebrities, such as TV hosts, officials, singers and other performers, have been frequently televised while wearing the skins of endangered animal, sending the wrong message to the public and fueling the popularity of this fashion trend.

Until last year, all Tibetan regions had tailor shops where clothing trimmed with exotic animal skins was being manufactured and openly displayed. Major market areas for these garments included Barkhor Street in Lhasa, the towns of Linxia and Xiahe in Gansu; and Xining and Kumbum in Qinghai. However, this situation changed dramatically in January 2006 following a speech by H.H. during a festival of
Tibetan Buddhism in India, where he condemned the practice of wearing the furs of endangered species for the sake of Tibetan fashion. The response to this speech was swift, with many Tibetans burning their Asian big cat (ABC) skins garments and products while many traders and shopkeepers discontinued their ABC business. Today, the vast majority of Tibetans are reluctant to publicly wear garments trimmed with ABC skins.

While several international conservation NGOs have had ABC species protection programs active in China for a number of years, until recently these programs were largely limited in scope to halting the widespread use of ABC species in Chinese traditional medicine. Since 2005, however, WWF and other international NGOs have launched several programs specifically to curb the market demand for ABC skin products in Tibetan communities in China.

2. The ABC Market Survey

In order to better understand the present trade and consumption of ABC products in the Tibetan cultural area, in March 2007 the WWF China - Lhasa Field Office conducted a survey of most major ABC product markets on the Tibetan Plateau. The overall goal of the market survey was to investigate current trends in ABC product trade and consumption, while specific goals of the survey included locating present concentrations of traders dealing in ABC products, determining current prices of ABC skins and products, and estimating the volume of this trade. However, since the events of January of 2006, the trade in ABC products has been largely driven underground by growing anti-fur sentiments that have spread across the Tibetan cultural area, and traders have become increasingly wary about who they discuss their business with. At present traders limit their conversation to prices only, become suspicious when potential buyers ask for more information about the ABC skin trade, and will not allow their wares to be photographed. Consequently, unlike previous surveys, the WWF team was unable to conduct a formal survey of buyers and sellers and instead had to pose as buyers themselves to glean what information they could from traders. In general, however, it remains easy to find ABC traders since these businesses continue to display less socially sensitive fox and otter skins in their shop windows and doorways, or sometimes even leopard and tiger skin pattern fake fur (Photo 1). When queried by Tibetan members of the WWF survey team posing as buyers, these traders generally admitted to having ABC skins for sale or being able to arrange their sale.
Map 1: Survey Sites. The survey was conducted in most major Tibetan market towns in the TAR, Gansu, and Qinghai, including Lhasa, Linxia, Xiahe, Kumbum, and Xining.

### 3. Survey Findings

The primary data collected by the survey team included ABC whole skin prices, the number of shops selling ABC skins at a given survey site, and the types of species being sold.

#### 3.1 ABC Whole Skin Prices

In general, prices of whole leopard and otter skins are now much lower than in 2005 and 2006, while prices of tiger skins have only fallen by about 10% (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tiger</th>
<th>Leopard</th>
<th>Otter</th>
<th>Fox</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior to</td>
<td>78,000-85,000</td>
<td>25,000-40,000</td>
<td>3,000-7,000</td>
<td>100-350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>January 2006</td>
<td>($10,000-$10,900)</td>
<td>($3200-$5100)</td>
<td>($380-$650)</td>
<td>($13-$45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>68,000-72,000</td>
<td>9,000-12,000</td>
<td>1,000-3,000</td>
<td>100-400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>($8700-$9200)</td>
<td>($1200-$1500)</td>
<td>($130-$380)</td>
<td>($13-$51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** During the period from 2005-2007 US$1.00 = ~RMB 7.8
3.2 ABC Skin Shops

The number of ABC skin shops has been subdivided into two categories: 1) shops that exclusively sell entire ABC skins and/or ABC skin trimmed clothing, and 2) shops that sell Tibetan antiques as well as entire ABC skins and/or ABC skin trimmed clothing. For background information purposes, a tally of a third category of shops has been included, that of traders of Tibetan antiques only, since the majority of Tibetan antique shops in the survey areas dealt in ABC skins and/or clothing prior to January 2006 (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of shops selling ABC skins and or clothing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Site</th>
<th>ABC Skins and/or Clothing</th>
<th>Tibetan Antiques and ABC skins and/or Clothing</th>
<th>Total ABC Product Shops</th>
<th>Tibetan Antiques without ABC Skins and Clothing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lhasa, TAR</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Not Counted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xining, Qinghai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumbum, Qinghai</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linxia, Gansu</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiahe, Gansu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>99</strong></td>
<td><strong>119</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Survey Sites

3.3.1. Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region - March 23, 2007

In Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, in contrast to July of 2005, when their were 23 shops openly selling ABC skin products on Lhasa's Barkhor Street alone, in March of 2007 none were openly selling ABC products. However, 6 shops on the Barkhor were found to be openly displaying fox and otter skins, and when asked, all admitted that they had ABC skin products available for sale. One of these traders even offered to pay the undercover WWF staff members a commission if they could find buyers for his stock of ABC products. Of these 6 shops, 2 were skin and clothing shops, while 4 others were primarily antique shops that also dealt in ABC products as a sideline (Table 2). Because of the large number of Tibetan antique shops catering to the booming tourist trade in Lhasa, these were not counted.
One former Lhasa ABC skin dealer was interviewed who stated that following the public ABC skin burnings during the winter of 2006, he drove with his remaining ABC skin and clothing stock to rural villages in Lhoka and Shigatse Prefectures, where villagers were willing to purchase these items at a 50% discount in the belief that one day the fashion of wearing ABC skin trimmed clothing would re-emerge. The dealer then took the proceeds of his ABC closeout sale and opened up a Tibetan antique business.

Today, there is great societal pressure in Lhasa and throughout Tibet to refrain from wearing ABC trimmed clothing. The change in attitude was striking during this year's Tibetan New Year's celebration. On the Tibetan New Year's Television Gala broadcast from Lhasa, in contrast to last year, when nearly every singer, dancer, and musician in the performance wore a traditional robe trimmed with tiger, leopard, or otter furs, only a few of these garments were shown during the three-day broadcast, with most performers having replaced their fur clothing trim with fake fur or silk brocade. On the streets and plazas in Lhasa over the Tibetan New Year Holiday, WWF staff members were unable to find a single ABC skin trimmed robed amidst the thousands of people out celebrating the holiday, and only a few robes trimmed with otter skin could be seen. Most dramatically, in one widely talked about incident that WWF was unable to obtain an eyewitness confirmation of, a man wearing a tiger fur trimmed robe ventured out onto Lhasa's Barkhor Street on the second day of the New Year's celebration and was accosted by an angry mob who tore the tiger fur from his robe.

While ABC skins are no longer openly displayed in shops in Lhasa, fox, otter, and lynx skins can be seen in shop doorways, as can parts of other threatened species, such as the skulls and horns of Tibetan antelope, Tibetan gazelle, argali, and wild yak. In contrast to the other 4 sites visited in this survey, where all of the ABC dealers found were of the Hui nationality (Chinese Muslims), in Lhasa all 6 shops visited were owned by Tibetans.

### 3.3.2. Xining, Qinghai Province - March 9, 2007

In Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, 5 shops were found to be selling ABC skins and/or products, 4 of which also sold antiques (Table 2). These businesses were all located within the vicinity of the Xining train and bus stations. One Hui Muslim shop keeper, Ma Yun, who was displaying otter skins outside his shop, was willing to discuss the local ABC trade. He said that very few Tibetans are now buying ABC skins and clothing and prices for these products are still falling. He also added that
while he used to sell a large volume of ABC skins, these are now only a minor part of
his business, although he admitted that he still has a large stock of ABC skins to be
sold.

3.3.3. Kumbum, Qinghai Province - March 8, 2007  (Kumbum Monastery)
Kumbum, Qinghai Province, is the location of Kumbum Monastery, one of the 6 most
important monasteries of the Gelugpa or "Yellow Hat" sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Unfortunately,
Kumbum is also one of the last large centers of the ABC trade in the Tibetan cultural area. In all, 45
shops were found in Kumbum that were selling ABC skins and clothing, 43 of which also sold
antiques (Table 2). Most of these shops were found on the 200 m long main street leading to the front gate of Kumbum
monastery, and all ABC product traders were Hui Muslims. 2 shops in Kumbum were
openly displaying leopard skins and products, while three shops were displaying coats
made entirely of otter skins, costing about RMB 7500 (US $960) each.

3.3.4. Linxia, Gansu - March 6, 2007
Linxia, Gansu is a major center of Islamic studies in China that lies at the northeast
edge of the Tibetan cultural area (Map 1, Appendix 1). In Linxia, the WWF staff
visited Dong Dajie Street, site of the Tibetan Cultural area's largest market for ABC
and other wildlife skins and products. Dong Dajie Street is about 300 m long and is
lined with 118 shops. Up until last year, all of these shops were known to be selling
ABC skins, attracting Tibetan customers from all over the northern and eastern Amdo
and Kham regions of the Tibetan Plateau. However, the nature of business on Dong
Dajie Street changed dramatically after the public ABC skin burnings of early 2006.
Some shops have completely ended their ABC line of business, and have switched to
selling Tibetan antiques instead. However, during the course of the survey, 59 shops
were found to still be selling ABC skins, 45 of which also sold Tibetan antiques
7 shops were seen in Linxia that continued to openly display leopard skins and/or skin products, although all of these were small pieces with no whole skins to be seen, while one shop had an otter skin coat on display. In Linxia, traders were particularly suspicious of customers inquiring about ABC products.

### 3.3.5 Xiahe, Gansu - March 7, 2007 (Labrang Monastery)

Like Kumbum, in Qinghai Province, Xiahe is the location of one of the 6 most important Gelugpa monasteries, the other 4 being Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, near Lhasa, and Tashilhunpo in Shigatse.

Xiahe was formerly a large center of the trade in ABC skin products, however the survey team only found 4 shops still selling these products, one of which was a skin shop, while the other 3 were antique shops (Table 2). As at Kumbum, all 4 shops were located on the street leading to the monastery, within about 200 m of the main monastery gate, and all were owned by Hui Muslims. None of the shops were openly displaying ABC products, but when asked all were willing to arrange sale of these products.

### 4. Discussion

In Gansu and Qinghai all ABC skin and product dealers encountered were Hui Muslims, while in Lhasa all sellers were Tibetan. Nearly all were very sensitive about discussing anything other than prices, and none allowed us to photograph the ABC products they had for sale. A total of 119 shops were found to be selling ABC skins and/or products at the 5 survey sites. However, the survey team did not see a single tiger skin or tiger skin product being openly displayed in any of these shops, although 9 shops were displaying leopard skins and clothing trimmed with leopard fur, 2 in Kumbum and 7 in Linxia. In general, shop keepers are now attracting customers for ABC products by displaying fox and otter skins and other items, such as fox fur hats,
as well as displaying fake tiger and leopard fur. The ABC skins that these dealers do show customers are now precut to the size necessary for trimming Tibetan robes, presumably because small pieces attract less attention than whole skins, but also because many of these pieces are second-hand furs that were purchased from Tibetans who had removed them from their robes.

Many former ABC product shop owners have gotten out of the ABC product business all together, at least one of whom sold his remaining ABC products at a large discount in Tibetan villages. These traders have typically switched over to dealing in Tibetan antiques, however, many antique dealers continue to deal in ABC products as a sideline. With the market slow, it is believed that at each survey site stockpiles of ABC skin products are being consolidated by 1 or 2 traders who buy deeply discounted ABC products, both new from smugglers and used from Tibetans who no longer feel comfortable owning ABC products, in the belief that there will be a stronger demand for these products in the future, either from Tibetan or Chinese buyers. Throughout the Tibetan cultural area there is now great societal pressure to refrain wearing ABC and skin products, so it is likely that the trade in these products will shift to China's eastern cities (Appendix 2).

In addition to ABC products, over the course of the survey, the WWF team found numerous other wildlife products for sale in fur, antique, traditional medicine, and souvenir shops. The following parts of threatened or endangered wildlife are commonly found in shops in Lhasa, Kumbum, Linxia, and Xiahe: male Tibetan antelope skulls with horns (RMB 200-400, US $26-$52), male Tibetan Gazelle skulls with horns (RMB 150-250, US $19-$32), male wild yak skulls with horns (RMB 5000, US $640), white-lipped deer skull with antlers (RMB 250-450, US $32-$58). Notably, no animal skulls or horns were found in the city of Xining. Wild plants believed to have medicinal values are also widely found in these markets, many of which are threatened by over-collection. These include snow lotus, which is believed to be an effective aphrodisiac, and caterpillar fungus, now costing RMB 60,000 to 80,000 ($7700-$10,300) per kilogram, which is believed to be good for blood circulation.

5. Conclusions

At the present time, it is not socially acceptable for either ordinary Tibetans or Tibetan celebrities to be seen wearing ABC products, and this regional fashion trend has come to an abrupt end. Consequently there is no longer a thriving market for ABC products in Tibet, and the prices of these items have fallen dramatically, with the exception of tiger furs. However, it was found that some Tibetan villagers are now buying heavily discounted ABC skins and products, though not wearing these publicly at the present time. Thus, while it was seen that the trade in ABC products has been driven
underground, it has by no means been eradicated. As this survey has revealed, dozens of traders in the Tibetan cultural area continue to buy, sell, and stockpile new and used ABC skins and products. While some traders believe the Tibetan market for ABC products will be revived in the future, it is likely that the bulk of this trade is now simply shifting to China's affluent eastern cities, where China's new rich are ready buyers (Appendix 2). It is difficult to gauge the volume of the illegal trade in ABC products in the Tibetan cultural area, and it is also difficult to predict emerging market trends for tiger and leopard skins. However, while Tibetans are no longer publicly wearing ABC skin trimmed traditional clothing, it is clear that the trade continues, and that Tibet remains a major transit point for ABC skins being smuggled from source countries in South Asia to the affluent cities of East Asia. Therefore, it is essential that ABC conservation programs and project work continue in Tibet and China to educate the general public about the plight of ABC species, and to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to properly address this issue.
Appendix 1:

February 19, 2006 - New York Times
The World:  A Spectator's Role for China's Muslims
By Jim Yardley
Linxia, China

Religion is often hidden in China, so the unabashed public display of Islam here in the
city known as Little Mecca is particularly striking. Men have beards and wear white
caps. Women wear head scarves. Minarets poke up from large mosques. A bookstore
sells Korans and religious study guides in Arabic.

These are reminders that with almost 21 million followers of Islam, China has roughly
as many Muslims as Europe or even Iraq. But the openness of religion in this isolated
region along the ancient Silk Road does not mean that China's Muslims are active
participants in the protests and seminal debates roiling the larger Islamic world. In
that world, they are almost invisible.

A case in point is the outrage and violence over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet
Muhammad that last week continued to ripple through Islamic countries. Here in
Linxia, which has more than 80 mosques, news of the cartoons spread quickly. The
local religious affairs bureau also moved quickly. Local Muslims say officials visited
imams and cautioned them against inciting followers.

The same happened in 2003, when a few protests broke out over the American
invasion of Iraq. The China Islamic Association, the quasi-governmental agency that
regulates Islam, quickly intervened and shut down the protest.

Not that most Chinese Muslims need any warning. With 1.3 billion people, China is
so huge and Muslims constitute such a tiny minority that most Muslims intuitively
learn to keep quiet.

"We can talk about these things among ourselves," said a shopper at a Muslim
bookstore. "But China has a law. We are not allowed to speak out about these things
that are upsetting the Muslim world."

The tight government regulation of religion, as well as restrictions on free speech, can
even separate Muslims on the Chinese mainland from their peers in Hong Kong,
where citizens enjoy far greater civil liberties. On Friday, Hong Kong Muslims held a
protest against the cartoons.

Human rights groups have long criticized the lack of religious freedom in China and
highlighted the harsh treatment of underground Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists and
Uighurs, the Muslim ethnic group in the western region of Xinjiang. Yet other Chinese Muslim groups that might be expected to support the Uighurs have rarely done so.

Dru C. Gladney, a leading Western scholar on Chinese Muslims, said the country's 10 Muslim nationalities usually find common cause only when they feel an issue denigrates Islam, as was the case with the cartoons. Sometimes, disputes between different factions can end in violence. Mr. Gladney said the largest group, the Hui, regard some Uighurs as unpatriotic separatists who give other Chinese Muslims a bad name. The Hui, he said, have blended fairly well into society by placing pragmatism over religious zeal and adopting the low profile of an immigrant group living in a foreign land, despite their presence in China for more than 1,300 years.

"They don't tend to get too involved in international Islamic conflict," said Mr. Gladney, a professor of Asian studies at the University of Hawaii. "They don't want to be branded as radical Muslims."

Yet Chinese Muslims should not be considered completely housebroken by authoritarian rule. Since the seventh century, when Islam began arriving in China along trading routes, there have been periodic Muslim revolts. Under the Communist Party, Muslim rage, if mostly contained on international issues, has erupted over localized affronts.

Large protests broke out in 1989. Muslims took to the streets to denounce a book that described minarets as phallic symbols and compared pilgrimages to Mecca with orgies. Government officials, who allowed the protests, quickly banned the book and even held a book burning.

A few years ago, thousands of Muslims protested in various cities after a pig's head was nailed to the door of a mosque in Henan Province. And last year, riots erupted after Hui from all over central China rushed to the aid of a Muslim involved in a traffic dispute.

At the Mayanzhuang Islamic school in Linxia, Ma Huiyun, 40, the director of studies, said the cartoons infuriated him and other local Muslims. "But we have to cooperate with the government," he said. "They asked us to be calm. They said they would speak on our behalf and express our unhappiness."

Mr. Ma said Chinese Muslims want closer ties to the Islamic heartland in the Middle East. His school now has two computers to obtain news from the Middle East or about the Iraq war. This year, Mr. Ma made his first pilgrimage to Mecca, one of roughly 10,000 Chinese Muslims estimated to have taken part in the hajj. The government has begun hiring Chinese Muslims to work in Middle Eastern embassies and state-owned companies that do business in the region.
But many Muslims here cite obstacles to developing relationships with Muslims in other countries, and as a result, the Chinese remain largely isolated. "There is really not a lot of understanding about us in the outside world," Mr. Ma said.

Linxia, once known as Hezhou, has been a center of Islam for centuries and now has a climate of religious tolerance. But Muslims elsewhere in China face more restrictions. In Xinjiang, for example, Muslim schools are tightly monitored and are allowed only limited numbers of students.

Many of the same societal problems that fueled protests by Islamic immigrants in Europe, discrimination, lower education levels, higher unemployment, a sense of cultural separation from the dominant majority, can be found in China, too. China's Muslim population is stable, but among upwardly mobile Chinese, Islam is not as popular as Buddhism or Christianity. The pressure to assimilate, too, has watered down Islam in many places; in cities, some people who call themselves Muslims abstain from eating pork but rarely attend mosque.

Not so in Linxia. At the Muslim schools in the city, most of the students are young boys from poor families who may one day became imams. It will be their job to navigate the delicate task of being Muslim in China.

"Obviously, we're different from Muslims in other parts of the world," said Ma Ruxiong, a teacher at the Nanguan Mosque, the city's oldest. "We just can't go into the streets and protest. You have to have permission from the government. But there are other things we can do. We pray to Allah to protect all Muslims in the world."
Sa Bei Long swung his large canvas sack of illegal goods over his shoulder and disembarked at Beijing's main train station after his long journey from Tibet.

The world's highest railway was intended to foster closer economic links between China's capital and the disputed mountain province, but it is also proving a fast, safe and cost-effective route to the country's richest market for fur smugglers such as Sa.

Until the railway was opened in July, the 19-year-old trader would have had to transport his wares by road, a long and hazardous journey along a route on which fatal crashes are common.

Now, for just 780 yuan (£52) return, Sa – a Han Chinese – can carry his precious cargo of exotic animal pelts on the 2,500-mile train ride from Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, in just 48 hours. "I sell mainly to rich Chinese. My last customer was a Taiwanese businessman," he said, as he set off on foot to hawk his illegal goods on the streets of Beijing. "The train is easy to use, safe and cheap. Many people are using it to sell stuff all over China."

When the railway opened, critics warned that it would hasten the cultural destruction of Tibet by making it more accessible to Han Chinese settlers. They did not foresee the threat it would pose to some of the world's most endangered species.

Many of Beijing's new rich have developed a taste for exotic animal hides to adorn their homes. Now, thanks to fast rail access to the distant Himalayan wilderness, they are easier to obtain – as are rare plants that are sought after for herbal medicine.

Sa nervously scans the streets for danger as he seeks potential customers. Beijing's many security officers are notoriously fickle, turning a blind eye one day, demanding bribes the next.

He uses a wolf skin, tucked under one arm, to lure prospective customers before offering them a discreet look inside his sack at the more exotic furs. Last week, he had rare snow leopard skins for sale at 48,000 yuan (£3,250) each, several black bear furs for 2,600 yuan and wolf pelts for 600 yuan.
An estimated 6,000 snow leopards remain in the wild and their numbers are falling rapidly. China's black bears are also threatened, but tigers are most at risk from the rising demand. Their skins are mostly brought into Tibet from India and sold to smugglers eyeing the lucrative trade in Beijing.

"Yes, I can get you a tiger skin for 200,000 yuan," Sa boasted to The Sunday Telegraph. "It will take 10 days to order and bring from Tibet by train."

Believing he was talking to a potential buyer, Sa agreed to a private showing of his wares at a Beijing hotel. On arrival, he nervously spread two snow leopard skins and a black bear pelt on the bed. A pungent, musty smell filled the room.

"The leopards were shot and the bullet went in here," he said, pointing to two small stitched incisions in the white, supple leather, "and came out there. But the fur is in good condition. The poachers are good shots."

Sa, one of an increasing number of fur vendors in Beijing, is paid a 10 per cent commission on each item sold. "If you want a tiger skin, I will try and catch the next available train," he said.

He agreed to a bigger deal of five leopard skins at "a bargain" 30,000 yuan each. Payment could be made in cash or transferred to a bank account, he said. A brief handshake sealed the deal and he agreed to return the next morning after picking up the order from a secret warehouse.

The Sunday Telegraph later cancelled the appointment with the smuggler and alerted conservation organisations to the illegal trade.

"We were not aware that fur traders were using the train link to sell in Beijing," said Zhu Chun Quan, head of conservation operations for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in China. "This has the potential to quicken the extinction of tigers, snow leopards and other endangered species. We will alert our officers in Lhasa and use the evidence you have provided to lobby the Chinese government to enforce strict checks on passengers and their luggage." Convicted smugglers would face long prison sentences.

Endangered plants used in Chinese medicine are also in demand through the new supply chain. Dr Jane Goodall, a British conservationist who is touring China, said widespread corruption among railway officials and police made laws ineffective.

"It is horrific to learn that this train is speeding up the extinction of these magnificent animals and other endangered species," she said. "It is up to the Chinese government to educate its citizens that buying such furs and plant medicines has irreversible consequences."