

## Hunting Man-Eating Leopards, Earning Fanfare and Flak



GAROT, [India](#) -- Hiding in the bushes along a river, Lakhpat Singh Rawat heard mountain deer bark. He peered through the scope of his hunting rifle and wondered whether the leopard that recently carried away a 2-year-old village boy was approaching. Within minutes, a brown form moved slowly across a grassy patch. When his assistant directed a powerful light at the animal, Rawat eased his finger from the trigger. "This is not the man-eating leopard I am hunting for. This one is much younger," Rawat whispered, plucking the weeds off his camouflage jacket.

The mustached 45-year-old with sharp eyes and oiled hair is a revered hunter of man-eating leopards in the Himalayan ranges of India's Uttarakhand state. Since 2002, Rawat has killed 27 big cats with the state's permission, earning both fanfare and flak in a battle between humans and wildlife conservation. Villagers hail him as a savior for eliminating the leopards that eat people, mostly children. But activists question a system that encourages him to hunt an endangered species.

The dangerous conflict between man and beast in these Himalayan villages has grown in recent years because of the shrinking number of natural prey for the spotted cat and the steady buildup of people and livestock on the forest fringes. In the past nine years, leopards have eaten 189 people in Uttarakhand. "This makes the villagers frightened and furious. They demand immediate action against the leopard," said K.L. Arya, the chief wildlife warden. "It is a very difficult decision to issue permits to capture or kill the man-eating leopards."

Arya has issued two licenses in the past 10 days; in most instances, the leopard is killed, not captured. One of the two licenses is for the leopard that leapt from nearby hills and killed a 2-year-old boy who was playing with his four siblings on the open terrace of his home. "The leopard caught my son by his neck right in front of my eyes. I could not even react," said the boy's tearful mother, Geeta Chik, clutching her remaining children. The boy's head and ankles were found in the upper reaches of the mountain the next day. "The leopard should be killed. I want no other child to be harmed again," his mother said.

The fear is especially palpable after sundown, when the villagers forbid children to play outdoors. Officials say that after each death, villagers block traffic in protest and demand local politicians' help. Rangers enlist shooters such as Rawat to kill the leopards. But those who study the biology and behavior of leopards question the continued hunting of the animals. "When we kill or capture and move them, we do not understand how we affect their ecosystem and social structure. It causes them tremendous psychological stress, and chances of conflict increase," said Vidya Athreya, a wildlife biologist with the Kaati Trust. "When the old ones are killed, new leopards come into the area." She added that villagers often fail to distinguish between accidental and deliberate attacks by leopards.

But Rawat, who is a schoolteacher, said a spate of leopard attacks on children in 2002 stirred his conscience. "Twelve schoolchildren were killed by a crafty leopard that picked them from wedding parties," the sharpshooter recalled. "Nobody was able to catch the animal. I could not watch this go on. I am a good shot, and I volunteered."

Now, almost every villager in the area knows Rawat. He is called the "Leopard Killer," and he gets fan mail. When he kills a wild cat, villagers anoint his forehead with sandalwood paste and chant slogans. They also anoint the dead leopard before it is taken for forensic analysis and cremation. "The leopard is a

holy animal. It is the vehicle" of one of the Hindu goddesses, Rawat said. "I do penance and pray every day when I hunt."

In April, he shot a 7-year-old leopard that was later found to be pregnant with twin cubs. Angry activists said the animal could have been trapped instead. Critics also say that adequate analysis is not done before the leopards are killed. "There is no guarantee that the leopards he kills are the same ones that kill people," said Hem Singh Gehlot, an activist working in villages located near wildlife pockets. "How long do they observe the animal and trace its routes before killing it? Relying on [footprints] is not enough." Under Indian law, leopards and tigers are endangered species. A tiger is declared a man-eater only after it kills six human beings, but the rules for leopards are flexible. Gehlot said that the effort is always to capture a man-eating tiger but that a man-eating leopard is often killed.

Rawat wants officials to train villagers to tranquilize the animals, and he advocates putting radio collars on leopards. But rangers say it is impossible to tag the animals because there are so many of them and they are not restricted to one area. Despite his hero-like image, Rawat is not without fear. He recently petitioned the Uttarakhand Forest Department to give him insurance when he goes to hunt. "I have the license to shoot only man-eating leopards," he said. "But when I go to hunt, it is the Himalayan black bear and snakes that I fear most."