



What does Travel Vlogging Mean for Snow Leopard Conservation?

Padma Rigzin  *

* Shiv Nadar University
Email: prigzin94@gmail.com

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Abstract

Since promoting tourism has been a conservation tool for protecting snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), this article invites stakeholders to ponder the long-term conservation implications of snow leopard representation in travel vlogs in the context of global environmental changes. Analysis of the portrayal of snow leopard sightings on touristic trips in Ladakh, India and Mongolia on three YouTube channels revealed that vlogs may work to undo the elusive, difficult-to-find character historically associated with snow leopards. While vlog messaging posits that it is adventurous to see the species, tours are shown as comfortable, with almost guaranteed sightings of this species. This changing portrayal requires stakeholders to acknowledge tourism promotion's potential paradox: promoting such activities as a solution to snow leopard conservation despite its increasingly noted high carbon emissions. The conversations surrounding this paradox need to be had, and research into tourism's impacts on habitat destruction and climate change should be encouraged.

Introduction

In one of the YouTube travel vlogs on snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), Kenneth Lawrence, a wildlife photographer, sights three snow leopards on his trip to Ladakh in India (Lawrence, 2024a). Travel vlogs documenting the experience of witnessing this feline in the wild, like Lawrence's, are increasingly finding a place on YouTube, which markedly differs from how snow leopards were portrayed in popular documentaries and books. Such vlogs often include additional details for viewers, such as contact information for expressing interest in the trip and making reservations. This article analyzes travel vlogs to explore the long-term conservation implications of how snow leopards are represented in widely circulated visual mediums, particularly in the context of tourism.

Snow leopard-related tourism started as a conservation tool to protect the animal by shifting the negative attitudes and perceptions sometimes held by local communities towards the species. Resident herders sharing habitat with snow leopards and other carnivores, such as the wolf (*Canis lupus*), face threats to their livelihoods when their livestock are preyed upon, resulting in cases of retaliatory killings (Jackson and Wangchuk, 2001; Jackson, Wangchuk and Hillard, 2002). In theory, the tourism industry can help to reduce or alleviate threats to herder livelihoods by providing alternative livelihoods to reduce the burden of livestock loss. In turn, it is presumed that local residents will be more tolerant of surrounding species, such as the snow leopard, and more willing to work toward their protection and conservation. In addition, tourists with such experiences may become more likely to support conservation efforts, have a greater appreciation for nature and educate others

about snow leopards and their habitats (Hanson *et al.*, 2023). As such, some conservationists have been active proponents in implementing tourism opportunities involving snow leopards in snow leopard habitats. Vlogs like Lawrence's are products of the growing trend and perceived demand for snow leopard tourism.

Encouragingly, some studies have highlighted the positive attitudes possessed by locals towards snow leopards, especially in areas where tourism is practiced (Namgail, Majumder and Dadul, 2016; Maheshwari and Sathyakumar, 2019; Vannelli *et al.*, 2019). However, high-consumption tourism contributes to large-scale environmental changes and rising global temperatures (Urry and Jonas, 2011), both known to have a pronounced impact on snow leopard rangelands (Hock *et al.*, 2019). This places the idea of tourism as an effective conservation tool in an awkward position relative to the long-term survival of the snow leopard and the larger biotic community of which the felines are part. With reference to the vlogs, this article invites snow leopard stakeholders to acknowledge the complex relations between conservation and tourism, recognizing that local people rely on snow leopard tourism for their livelihood in whole or in part from the practice. However, it also admits the pressing need to address this relation in the current context. Exemplary cases derived from three different YouTube channels will be used to ponder the long-term conservation implications of the feline's representation in mass-circulated visual mediums vis-à-vis tourism.

Methods

There are two reasons for choosing vlogs as a site of analysis. First, travel vlogs promote tourism and their associated business enterprises. For instance, Lawrence (2024a) shows luxurious

housing arrangements on his trip to Ladakh, all of which are mentioned as partners of his trip. Viewers are requested to visit partner websites and book accommodations and tours shown in his videos. Second, vlogs (and, for that matter, films) are an essential aspect of social science research tools. Visual representations are cultural forms that can be employed to highlight and underline essential aspects of social life (Denzin, 2004).

With this in mind, vlogs were watched as part of a sociological/anthropological research project exploring the relationships between snow leopards and humans in Ladakh. As a part of this, the author has done 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2023-2024) in Ladakh for ongoing PhD research. During fieldwork, the author noticed six documentaries were shown to tourists by tour operators in guest houses in Ladakh. These were *Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard* (Kelly and Miles, 2005), *On Snow Leopard Mountain (15 min)* | *Planet Earth II* | *Behind The Scenes* 2017 (BBC, 2017), *Mountains (Full Episode)* | *Hostile Planet* (Clarke, 2020), *The Velvet Queen* (Amiguet and Munier, 2021), *Gyamo-Queen of the Mountains* (Trivedy and Pandey, 2017) and *India's Wild Leopards* (Kadur, 2024). In addition, many tourists were familiar with Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard* (1978). Given this, the article compares snow leopard representation in documentaries and the book to the newest form of representation: travel vlogs. As such, a total of 20 vlogs, six documentaries and one book on snow leopards were engaged with for this article. The 20 vlogs were available on YouTube and were selected by searching for "snow leopard travel vlogs" on YouTube. After 20 vlogs, the broader themes started to repeat.

The impressions and feelings from all content forms were recorded, which showed that values of

elusiveness, adventure and comfort (or absence of it) emerged as the most common and repetitive themes. The 20 pieces of vlogs were narrowed down by focusing on three YouTube channels that produced travel vlogs. The creators of these channels are Kenneth Lawrence, Thomas Heaton and Monkey Magic (Lawrence, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Heaton, 2024; Sahni, 2023). The first two are photographers, with channels catering to wildlife and photography enthusiasts. Monkey Magic's channel has three snow leopard-specific content. However, the channel does not make wildlife-specific content but rather curates general travel vlogs, broadening the scope of the audience that watches its content. These three channels were selected because their vlogs have relatively better-than-average production quality and narration and more views than most of the other vlogs analyzed. Each of the three also exhibits a different presentation style, offering insight into a wider breadth of vlogging methods and content dissemination. While Kenneth Lawrence and Thomas Heaton produce vlogs with slow-paced narrations, Monkey Magic delivers a stylized and fast-paced storytelling technique. Monkey Magic's channel has 2 million subscribers compared to Lawrence's 55,000 and Heaton's 579,000. The three channels also show geographical diversification in the snow leopard range, as Lawrence and Monkey Magic's travel vlogs were filmed in Ladakh and Thomas Heaton's in Mongolia.

Upon vlog selection, taking inspiration from Castellano's (2018) critical media analysis of visual aesthetics and narrative of the interactive film *Bear 71* (2012), a scene-by-scene analysis of the vlogs was done. The central scenes were noted, and detailed descriptions of the scenes that deal with the three social values (the elusiveness of snow leopards, adventure, and comfort) depicted

on their respective trips were registered. The portrayal of the social values was interpreted based on the description and compared to the depiction of snow leopards in *The Velvet Queen*, the famous and critically acclaimed film (Amiguet and Munier, 2021) and *The Snow Leopard* (Matthieson, 1978). *The Velvet Queen* was shown to the guests, and it epitomizes the theme of elusive snow leopards, which also underwrites five other films regularly shown to tourists. So, unlike Castellano (2018), who analyzed one visual content, my article compares snow leopard travel vlogs from three YouTube channels with other representations of snow leopards.

Results

Firstly, the three channels' vlogs on their respective snow leopard sighting tours show that the trips consisted of *successful sightings* of snow leopards. Kenneth Lawrence's trip to Ladakh is divided into three episodes, each roughly half an hour long. In the first episode, Lawrence (2024a) sees three snow leopards. The second episode follows a female snow leopard and her cub's, challenged by losing a killed ibex to a male snow leopard (Lawrence 2024b). The third episode focuses on a single snow leopard with a predated ibex (Lawrence 2024c). In short, all three episodes show successful sightings of the feline, possibly presenting the snow leopard as *easily findable*. Concurrently, the three episodes try to maintain that the felines are challenging to spot. As Lawrence (2024c) mentions in the last episode: "my 10 day trip was extremely short but it certainly taught me that no matter how much time you spend in the wild when you embrace obsession obstacles dissolve themselves and rewards become a plenty" (23:36-23:52). Similarly, Thomas Heaton's (2024) vlog on his snow leopard and

landscape photography tour in western Mongolia portrays an easily findable snow leopard, to which he was taken to by the tour organizer on the first day. After sighting the feline, Heaton passingly mentions, without giving visuals, that he saw another snow leopard seven days later. Somewhat similarly, Monkey Magic's (2023) vlog on snow leopards shows that he is able to see three snow leopards in one of his tours to Ladakh. With a catchy title, "The day I faced death in the Himalayas (Snow Leopards)", the vlog is one of the most viewed vlogs out of all the 20 vlogs, with 1.1 million views and 14:11 minutes in length. In comparison, Heaton's vlog has 179,213 views, and views for Lawrence's three episodes combined is 248,416 views (175,995; 27,957; 44,464).

Secondly, the vlogs also highlight that being on a snow leopard tour is adventurous. For instance, the first episode of Lawrence's vlog highlights the quickly changing weather conditions over the course of an afternoon in the snow leopard habitat. Lawrence (2024a) asserts, "It had stopped snowing, the skies had cleared up, and then it started snowing all over again" (09:30-09:55). Heaton shows adventure by living in a Mongolian yurt in the cold and traversing the landscape on dirt roads in a big sport utility vehicle. Monkey Magic shows that he had to rush into a car to go to the sighted snow leopards, three in number, and then climb a rocky mountain. He comments on the adrenaline rush as he mentions, 'when I was climbing the mountain...I was feeling the next level of joy' (08:40-08:45). He maintains a distance of 250 to 300 meters from the felines. He peeps through the spotting scope (portable telescope) and sees the three snow leopards looking back towards him. He murmurs: 'I made direct eye contact with all three leopards' (10:33-10:53). He comments that their gaze generates fear, and he

imagines that the cats are about to attack him; however, he utters: ‘5 minutes after feeling that fear, my brain realized that snow leopard is a shy animal and it doesn’t attack humans’ (11:40-11:50). The rush to see the snow leopards, the climb and the cats’ looking at the YouTuber point to how adventure is exhibited on the screen.

Thirdly, the vlogs present snow leopard tours as not just adventurous but also comfortable. Lawrence, whose vlogs are produced in partnership with tour operators, notes the comfort of the inn and the hotel where he stayed. Similarly, Heaton is served fresh, warm meals that highlight comfort during his stay in a cozy Mongolian yurt. In the description, Heaton thanks another photographer for organizing the tour, mentions that another trip is being organized, and drops a website link leading to more information. Monkey Magic similarly highlights comfort in a homestay.

Discussion

The travel vlogs from three different YouTube channels in two regions in the snow leopard range conveyed snow leopards as being easy to find, with sightings more or less guaranteed, the adventure of a lifetime, and one that can be done comfortably. Such messaging may generate more momentum for snow leopard tourism operations as viewers desire their own similar experience, outpacing the original purpose of local homestay tourism operations in isolated locations as a means to help protect herder livelihoods and prevent retaliatory killings. This has to be noted in the context where studies have shown that social media content on destinations is related to increased tourism inflow (Barbe and Neuburger, 2021; Pop *et al.*, 2022; Wang and Yan, 2022; and Hussain *et al.*, 2024).

Alternative to the travel vlogs discussed

herein, the documentary films have shown the snow leopards as elusive and difficult to find. *The Velvet Queen* traces two Frenchmen, Sylvain Tesson and Vincent Munier, on a mission to see the ‘elusive’ snow leopard. Munier, a famous French wildlife photographer, guides Sylvain Tesson, a popular French writer and adventurer, in the search for the snow leopard in Tibet. Tesson narrates: “He [Munier] invited me to go with him to Tibet to pursue a being I thought had disappeared...The snow leopard. For me, a dream. For him, a rendezvous” (00:08:19-00:08:49). Associating the snow leopard with a dream presents it as elusive. The film shows the protagonists undertaking a challenging journey in which they endure extreme difficulties like coldness, long waiting periods, and negotiating the high-altitude treks to finally see the snow leopard (Amiguet and Munier, 2021). This portrayal of snow leopards is also found in conservation-themed films shown to tourists, like *Gyamo-Queen of the Mountains* (Trivedy and Pandey, 2017) and *India’s Wild Leopards* (Kadur, 2024). The 1978 book *The Snow Leopard* (Matthiessen) narrates the two-month arduous journey of Peter Matthiessen, the author, with biologist George Schaller in Nepal without sighting the feline. The book set the tone for elusive snow leopards in that even those undertaking intensive, uncomfortable, arduous journeys may never see one.

Conclusion

These mass-viewed vlogs show that snow leopards are easily findable and that travel is comfortable without being unadventurous. Before snow leopard expeditions go down the road of near mass tourism, it is important to reflect on the reason for promoting snow leopard tourism in the first place. Historically, snow leopards

faced a localized threat of retaliatory killing from pastoralists seeking to protect their livelihoods. Conservation interventions, such as predator-proof corrals, livestock insurance, and homestay-based tourism, helped alleviate such pressures, reducing the likelihood of retaliatory killings. However, social media and technological advancements have altered how travel is disseminated, portrayed, advertised, and booked, creating an increase in focus on destinations such as snow leopard habitat. Unfortunately, tourism depends on fossil fuel-based travel to destinations and back, as well as resource-intensive consumption like transportation in diesel vehicles and flown-in food to destinations that are often not known to be agriculturally productive. The issue of plastic waste generation is another matter. Given that (1) vlogs are made by people who vouch for being pro-conservation, (2) many tourism companies claim that they work for conservation, (3) snow leopard tourism was started as one of many ways to protect local herder livelihoods and minimize retaliatory killings, which are near null at present in Ladakh (personal observation), and (4) the anthropogenic environmental changes that can be caused by mass-tourism are a much larger and more global threat to snow leopards, should snow leopard stakeholders see tourism promotion as a means of snow leopard conservation? Moreover, the long-term conservation implications of the feline's representation in mass-circulated visual mediums vis-à-vis tourism may spur the snow leopard habitat shrinking, which scholars are predicting in climate change scenarios (Aryal *et al.*, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2022). In this context, acknowledging the paradox should encourage more deliberation among conservationists on promoting snow leopard tourism as a conservation

means. In addition, research on tourism's carbon emissions concerning snow leopard's rangeland, the comparison of homestay versus luxury tourism, and the implications of potential mass snow leopard tourism should be undertaken.

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Conflicts Of Interest

No known conflicts of interests.

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