

# Fashion Statement Spells Death for Tibetan Antelope

THIS IS A STORY OF BEAUTY TURNED UGLY.

A STORY OF AN ENTIRE SPECIES  
TURNED FASHION VICTIM.

A STORY OF MURDER AND SUBTERFUGE  
ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD.

It is the story of *shahtoosh*, which, roughly translated from Persian, means “from nature and fit for a king”—oft shortened to “king of wools.” The description is no hyperbole. Shahtoosh is gossamer in weight and texture, soft as a baby’s skin, yet warm. Scarves and shawls made of shahtoosh come in natural beige and off-white, may be dyed rich colors, and are sometimes intricately embroidered. They sell for US\$1,000 to \$5,000 and more, and have become the rage among the rich, famous, and fashionable.

Movie stars wrap newborns in them, socialites drape them over ball gowns, and a Hong Kong tycoon dines with one in his lap.

Shahtoosh owes its “royal” status to the hair from which it is woven. The coat of the chiru (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), the endangered Tibetan antelope, contains some of the world’s finest hair, measuring three-quarters the width of cashmere and one-fifth that of human hair. Shahtoosh is so fine that even a large shawl can be pulled with ease through a finger ring, giving it its other name, “ring shawl.”

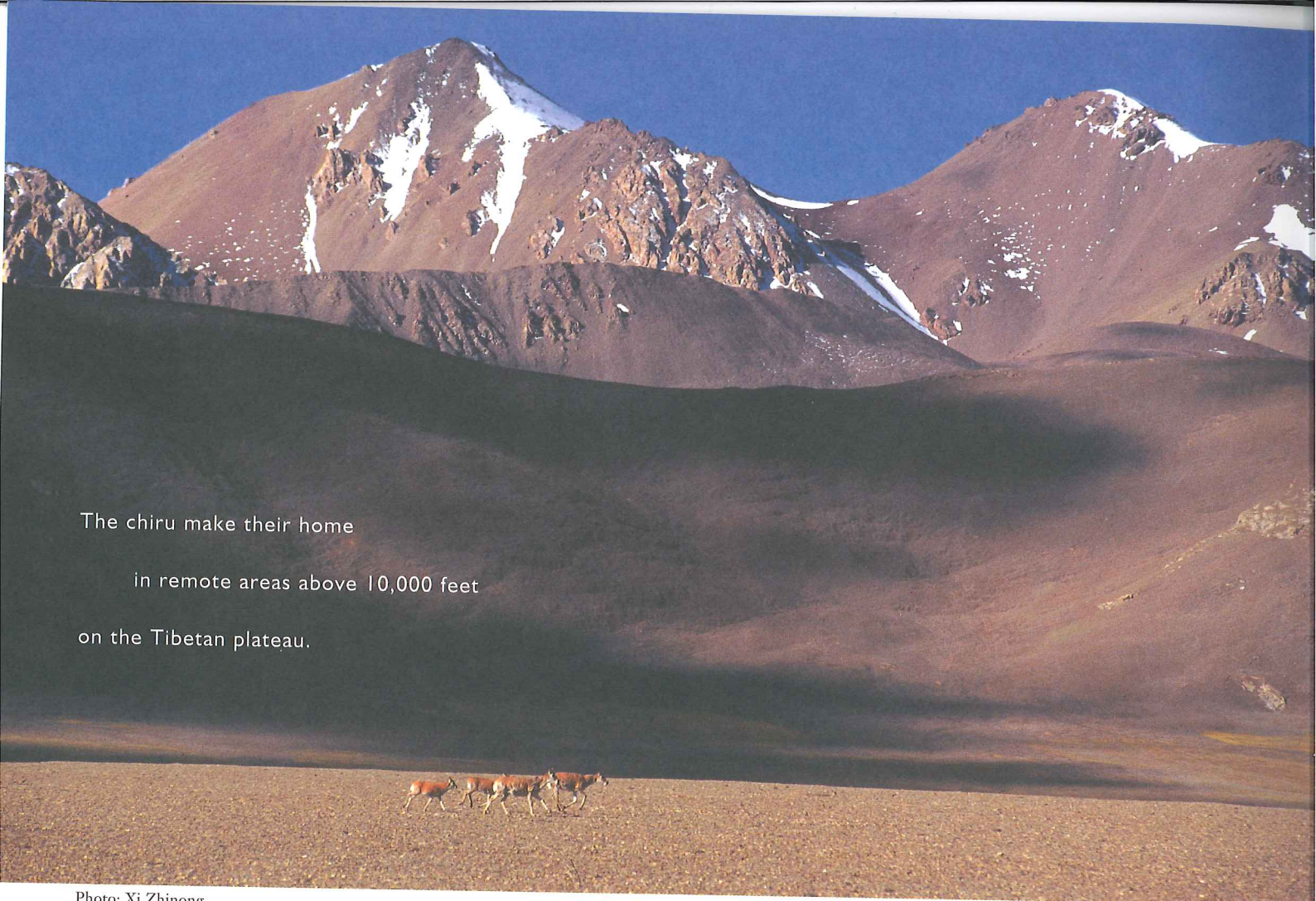


**TRAFFIC**  
—EAST ASIA—

**TRAFFIC**  
—INDIA—

Photo: George Schaller





The chiru make their home  
in remote areas above 10,000 feet  
on the Tibetan plateau.

Photo: Xi Zhinong

Behind this luxury lies death: three to five chiru die to provide the 300-600 grams of raw wool needed to produce a single shawl, according to the Wildlife Protection Society of India. Poachers are gunning down chiru in droves for the sake of this fashion craze. Dr. William Bleisch of the China Exploration and Research Society (CERS) reported that, in the summer of 1999, he personally saw more than 900 skinned chiru carcasses, many of them pregnant females, in China's high-desert Arjin Shan Reserve.

#### **How and Where Shahtoosh Began**

Chiru are virtually exclusive to the Tibetan Plateau, though they occasionally wander into India's Ladakh region. Since 1979, chiru have been listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in

Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), thereby banning chiru and their parts and derivatives from international trade. The People's Republic of China gives them the highest level of legal protection under its Wildlife Protection Law, prohibiting chiru hunting and trade in chiru parts without government permission. Chiru trade also is prohibited within India under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, except in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which is afforded special status under India's constitution.

Shahtoosh shawls crafted by Kashmiri weavers have been dowry items in northern India for centuries, and it is possible that this level of demand posed no threat to the chiru's survival. What set the animal on the path to extinction was its elevation from



dowry treasure in India to must-have accessory in world fashion centers. How this fad started is unclear. What is certain is that, at its current level, the shahtoosh craze drives a trade that the chiru cannot sustain.

Despite legal protection and trade bans, the burgeoning Western market for shahtoosh caused a dramatic increase in chiru poaching in the late 1980s and early 1990s—a connection first noted by the eminent field biologist Dr. George Schaller of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), who estimates in *Wildlife of the Tibetan Steppe* (1998) that “tens of thousands of animals must have been killed” to supply the trade during that time.

In 1900, the chiru population may have been a robust 1 million animals. In a report issued in December 1998, China’s State Forestry Administration (SFA) cited Schaller’s estimate that fewer than 75,000 chiru remained in the wild in 1995. Based on confiscated chiru pelts and wool, along with discarded chiru carcasses found by CERS and government officials, SFA estimates that 20,000 chiru fall victim to poaching each year.

### **Shoot-Out on China’s High Plains**

The world’s growing demand for shahtoosh has left a trail of bloodshed. From 1990 through 1998, Chinese authorities documented 100 cases of chiru poaching (SFA, 1998). They confiscated 17,000 chiru pelts and 1,100 kilograms of chiru wool, as well as 300 guns and 153 vehicles used by poachers.

Some 3,000 people were arrested and at least three poachers shot dead.

In many instances, anti-poaching teams were outnumbered and outgunned by packs of poachers with more sophisticated weapons and better vehicles. Soinam Darje, who headed an anti-poaching patrol credited with many arrests, became a national hero in China when he was killed in a gunfight with poachers on 8 January 1994 (SFA, 1998). At least one other government official trying to save chiru from poachers has been killed in action.

### **All Roads Lead to Kashmir**

A recent investigation by TRAFFIC India confirms that, where chiru wool is concerned, all smuggling routes lead to the famed weavers in the Indian state of Jammu

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Photo: George Schaller



Photo: TRAFFIC East Asia

SHAHTOOSH SHAWLS  
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NORTHERN INDIA  
FOR CENTURIES.

and Kashmir. Some routes take the wool from the high plains of China directly over mountain passes and into Kashmir, while others cross Nepal and other Indian states before arriving in Kashmir.

Some Tibetans carry chiru wool from China to Kashmir, either directly or via Nepal. In other cases, Tibetans hand over the wool to traders in Nepal, who then carry it into India. In addition, Kashmiri traders come to Nepal to buy chiru wool, then smuggle it into Kashmir themselves.

The wool travels by horseback, truck, train, and airplane. It may be hidden in shipments or parcels of wool from domestic animals, such as sheep or the pashmina goat, whose fine wool is a near-equivalent of shahtoosh. The contraband is sometimes stuffed inside jackets and blankets. At the lowest and only driveable pass between China and Nepal, customs officials in 1998 found a cache of 219 kilograms of chiru wool behind a false ceiling in a truck carrying sheep's wool.

**From Weaver to Merchant**

Kashmiri weavers are famous for working the finest of wools, from cashmere and silk to pashmina and shahtoosh, into intricate weaves with superior finishing. Because Jammu and Kashmir is the only state in India to allow trade in shahtoosh, the weavers themselves break no laws. The violators are those who supply the chiru

wool from China and who export finished shahtoosh from Kashmir.

Shahtoosh shawls leave Kashmir via road, rail, and air for Delhi and Punjab. (Sources tell TRAFFIC India that roads are considered the safest mode of travel for smuggling.) From Delhi and Punjab, traders distribute shahtoosh to the world.

**From the Subcontinent  
to the World**

In mid-1999, a CITES mission visited Nepal and India in order to better understand the status of tiger conservation and trade. While browsing in a hotel gift shop in Kathmandu, mission members were offered shahtoosh shawls for US\$1,000 each. A TRAFFIC India investigator found shahtoosh shawls for sale in Kathmandu and Pokhara, priced from US\$1,400 to \$1,900.

In Delhi, the CITES mission was offered shahtoosh shawls by several traders in shopping arcades within five-star hotels. One establishment brought out dozens of shahtoosh shawls in a variety of sizes and colors, with prices starting at US\$1,000. Manoj Misra, director of TRAFFIC India, estimates there are 2,000 shahtoosh shawls for sale in Delhi on any given day.

Informants tell TRAFFIC that shahtoosh buyers from around the world regularly fly to Delhi for private showings or to patronize shops in upscale hotels. Shahtoosh then makes its way from Delhi to the fashion capitals of



the world in personal luggage, by courier, hidden in cargo, and by post. Informants say that buyers from Europe, especially France, Italy and Spain, are the most avid, though Hong Kong is also a hot market.

In the first quarter of 1999 alone, these examples of shahtoosh trafficking came to light in Delhi (TRAFFIC India):

- On 26 February, customs authorities at Indira Gandhi International Airport seized nine shahtoosh shawls from a French national.
- On 6 March, Delhi wildlife inspectors seized 159 shahtoosh shawls from a shop in Old Delhi.
- On 14 March, customs officials at Indira Gandhi International Airport seized 13 shahtoosh shawls from a courier package bound for Paris.
- On 17 March, Wildlife Department officials seized 96 shahtoosh shawls from a shop in Old Delhi, and Forest Department officials seized another 13 in New Delhi.

Photo: Xi Zhinong





Mature male chirus have

elegant, lyre-shaped horns

and striking black markings on the face and legs.



Photo: George Schaller

In all, Delhi officials seized 290 shahtoosh shawls in the first three months of 1999. Given the ease with which the light, thin shawls can be stowed and hidden among legal goods, it is logical to assume that these seizures are the mere tip of an iceberg of illegal trade.

### **The Hong Kong Story**

Hong Kong serves as a case study for the consumer end of the shahtoosh trade. By the mid-1990s, the rich women of Hong Kong known as “tai-tais” were hosting home sales and private showings of shahtoosh. These sales were not by any means covert. Despite the longstanding trade ban, Hong Kong’s elite were not the least bit

furtive about their passion for shahtoosh. On 19 December 1997, in an article headlined “Christmas wrapping,” the *South China Morning Post* reported: “...some tai-tais are known to have a collection of at least 30 to 40 [shahtoosh items] in different colours [sic]...a devotee [pictured], has even arranged...with some of her friends... to fly to New Delhi for a shahtoosh shopping trip.”

Not that Hong Kong wildlife officials weren’t trying to crack down on the shahtoosh trade. In 1995, they seized 100 shawls from a socialite. However, the socialite’s lawyers dissuaded the government from prosecution, arguing that any case would fail



in court because there was no way to prove that the shawls were made from the hair of an endangered species. Months later, the Hong Kong government returned the shawls to their owner and dropped the case.

Afterwards, the shahtoosh trade grew ever more blatant in Hong Kong. Two years after the failed case, a boutique in the territory's Central district displayed shahtoosh shawls in its window, complete with a sign touting the illegal goods.

#### **Informants of a Different Sort**

Some shahtoosh traders claim that their shawls are made from the down of the non-existent "toosh" bird. Others tell of a bucolic world where nomadic shepherds follow chiru herds, plucking their precious hairs from the bushes they brush against while grazing. Anyone who has seen pictures of the Tibetan Plateau knows there are no such bushes. Nor are there chiru that can be shorn or plucked. This very wild and shy animal must be killed to obtain its hair. In many cases, poachers use automatic weapons to gun down whole chiru herds. Other animals die singly, caught in leg-hold traps.

Some shahtoosh aficionados claim chiru are killed because their horns are used in traditional Chinese medicine, their wool being a mere byproduct. The truth is precisely the opposite. According to SFA's 1998 report, "The purpose of the Tibetan antelope poaching is for its wool. Up to now, all

arrested poachers have confessed to it...Discarded carcasses, together with horns, are seen on all poaching sites..." On the other hand, chiru horns are indeed sold in China, mainly for ornamental purposes. Their low cost and abundance attest to the relentless poaching of chiru for shahtoosh.

Gradually, shahtoosh buyers have been learning the truth. By late 1996, TRAFFIC East Asia began receiving tips about when and where shahtoosh was being sold. Some information came from shahtoosh owners wishing to make amends for their purchases. Callers told of the whereabouts of private shahtoosh sales, as well as of shops selling shahtoosh. Hong Kong authorities promised to act on these tips provided that TRAFFIC helped them find a method to prove that a given shahtoosh item came from chiru. TRAFFIC East Asia found that method at the U.S. government's National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory.

#### **The Court Case that Turned the Tide**

By 1997, the blatantly illegal trade in shahtoosh was rampant. Some companies were even selling shahtoosh on their Internet sites. Unfortunately, the whole world seemed to be paralyzed by the same weak point in law enforcement: How could prosecutors prove in a court of law that a shahtoosh shawl derived from this particular endangered species?

CHIRU CANNOT BE  
SHORN OR PLUCKED.  
THIS VERY WILD  
AND SHY ANIMAL  
**must be killed**  
TO OBTAIN ITS HAIR.



Photo: Xi Zhinong



Photo: Xi Zhinong

WITHOUT THE  
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**Chiru poachers.**

A case that at last answered that question began on 18 December 1997. Acting on a tip given to TRAFFIC East Asia, Hong Kong Agriculture and Fisheries Department officers raided a private exhibition at the Furama Hotel, seizing 130 shahtoosh shawls there and 10 others from the exhibitor's shop. Raids on three other shops resulted in the confiscation of an additional 46 shawls. The first 140 shawls became the foundation of *Hong Kong v. Assomull*, which may go down in history as the case that closed the shahtoosh loophole.

In order to prepare their prosecution, the Hong Kong Government Laboratory sent a chemist to the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory in the United States. Upon her return, the chemist used that lab's test to analyze the confiscated shawls and found them to contain chiru hairs. Hong Kong authorities took the additional step of flying the creator of the identification method from the United States to Hong Kong to testify.

On 25 February 1999, Hong Kong Magistrate David John Dufton convicted Bharati Ashok Assomull of possession of highly endangered species (in the form of those 140 shahtoosh shawls) without a license. Dufton was painstaking in his remarks. He called Assomull's a "very serious offense" and noted Hong Kong's "international obligations" under CITES. He said

he was "satisfied" that the laboratory method used to identify the shawls as derived from chiru was "admissible" and "beyond doubt." He further commented that the Hong Kong chemist who tested the shawls was a "reliable witness" and "sufficiently skilled" to identify chiru hair.

On 13 April 1999, Dufton sentenced Assomull to a three-month suspended jail term and fined her more than US\$40,000. If caught selling shahtoosh within the 12 months following her sentencing, she will be made to serve the jail sentence.

Hong Kong has successfully prosecuted two other cases of illegal shahtoosh trade to date, including one involving an Indian national selling shahtoosh from his room in one of Hong Kong's five-star hotels. Entries in his passport showed that he had been coming to Hong Kong during the same pre-Christmas period for years.

### **The Beginnings of a Turnaround**

Since the SFA's December 1998 report, efforts by Chinese authorities to stop chiru poaching have led to at least 80 arrests, four jail sentences, and the confiscation of 1,658 chiru skins, 18 vehicles, 14 guns, and 12,000 bullets, according to government records. Two more poachers have died.

However, halting chiru poaching is a near-impossible task. China's Arjin Shan Reserve—where Dr. Bleisch saw 900 skinned chiru in August 1999—encompasses 45,000



square kilometers. To patrol this mountainous expanse, the reserve's managers have only four vehicles. In all, the chiru roams through 605,000 square kilometers of remote high desert habitat, an area larger than France.

At the same time, one kilogram of raw chiru wool can bring a poacher the equivalent of several month's wages. Middlemen linking poachers to weavers to end-use consumers make exponentially increasing profits at each level of trade.

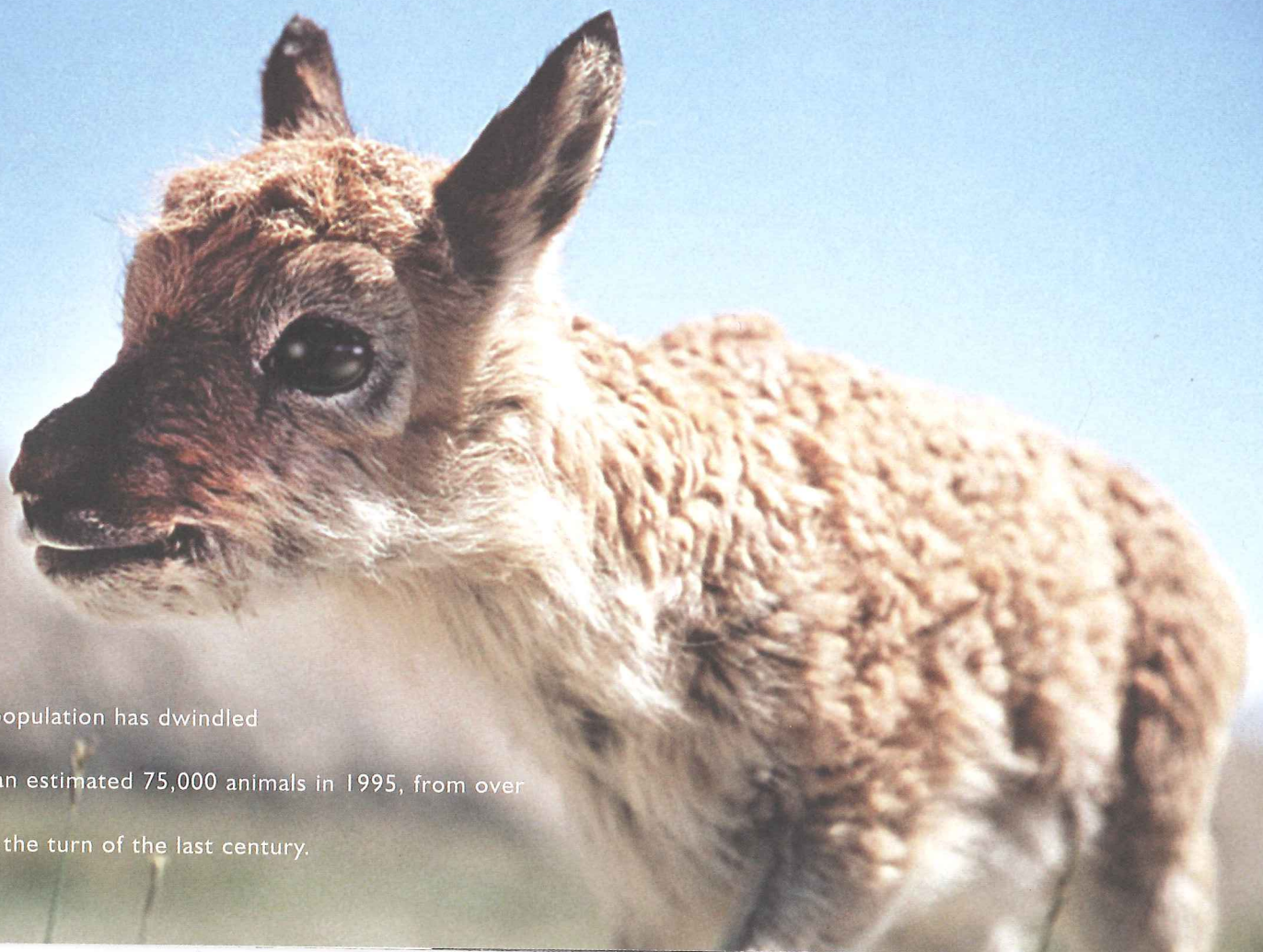
However, without the end-use consumer, there would be no profit to trickle

down to chiru poachers for their efforts.

Cutting off demand appears to be a far more feasible way of saving the chiru than stopping poaching in what one conservationist calls "the wild west at 18,000 feet."

Consumers are already showing signs of changing their minds. Dinner conversation among Hong Kong's elite is turning against the buying, selling, and wearing of shah-toosh. One tai-tai recently wrote to British *Vogue*, protesting a picture of Lady Charlotte Fraser wearing a shahtoosh sarong-style, next to an article entitled "Survival Tactics." "It is neither socially

Photo: Dr. Bill Bleisch/CERS



The chiru population has dwindled

to an estimated 75,000 animals in 1995, from over

a million at the turn of the last century.



Discouraging demand for shahtoosh

may be the only way to prevent  
the decimation of the entire chiru species.



Photo: Xi Zhinong

acceptable to wear shahtoosh,” she wrote, “nor to claim you need one to survive.” Socialite entrepreneur David Tang, who once stubbornly pledged allegiance to buying shahtoosh and likes to place a shawl on his lap at supper, publicly pronounced: “Now I will not buy any shahtoosh.”

When TRAFFIC East Asia staff recently asked a seller of pashmina shawls in Hong Kong’s famous Stanley Market whether she had any shahtoosh, she responded with a vehement “no!” “I used to,” she added, “but I do not want to go to jail.”

Hong Kong is but one market for shahtoosh. Many others, such as those in western Europe, North America, and Japan, require further investigation and exposure. At the time of this writing, a case involving the

seizure of 138 shahtoosh shawls from a Delhi-based company in London was pending in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, law enforcement officials in the United States were investigating the sale of shahtoosh shawls by a Hong Kong company to more than 100 high-society women in New York. The case is currently under grand jury investigation.

#### **Recommended Actions**

- Consumers can help stop the illegal trade in shahtoosh by simply refusing to buy articles made from it. If a merchant labels an item as pashmina—the near-equivalent to shahtoosh—be sure that it is what it says it is. Price is an indicator. If the item costs US\$1,000 or more, it may contain shahtoosh. When in doubt, refuse to buy.



- Friends of consumers can play a powerful role in discouraging demand for shahtoosh. They need only tell the true story of shahtoosh. Wearing shahtoosh is supporting the decimation of chiru, the smuggling of their hair, and the murder of those trying to protect the animal.
- Governments, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations should fund efforts to enhance and expand anti-poaching efforts throughout the chiru's range.
- The government of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir should make the manufacture and trade of shahtoosh illegal.
- All countries should stop all internal trade, export, and import of shahtoosh products, and launch in-depth investigations when trade is found.
- Law enforcement authorities should develop and share reliable laboratory methods for identifying chiru hairs in shahtoosh to support court actions against illegal trade.
- Governments and non-governmental organizations should launch information campaigns aimed at shahtoosh consumers, explaining the serious implications—for both chiru and consumers—of buying, selling, and wearing shahtoosh. Even travelling with a shahtoosh of one's own can be illegal.

Text by Judy Mills

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Photo: Xi Zhinong







**IUCN**  
The World Conservation Union

The TRAFFIC Network is the world's largest wildlife trade monitoring program with offices covering most parts of the world. TRAFFIC is a program of WWF—World Wide Fund for Nature (World Wildlife Fund in North America) and IUCN (The World Conservation Union), established to monitor trade in wild plants and animals. It works in close cooperation with the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

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