

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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SECRETARY MORTON PROPOSES EIGHT SPECIES OF WILD CATS FOR LIST OF ENDANGERED FOREIGN WILDLIFE

Eight species of wild cats were proposed for addition to the list of endangered foreign wildlife today by Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton. His proposal, if it takes final effect, would ban the further import of any parts or products from these animals into the United States.

"The eight species--cheetah, leopard, tiger, snow leopard, jaguar, ocelot, margay and tiger cat--are all being exposed to heavy exploitations by the skin trade," Morton said. "Organized poaching rings flaunt the laws of the countries where these cats originate and send a flow of their furs to feed the fashion salons of the United States and Europe. Also, the habitat of these big cats is being changed so rapidly their survival is becoming difficult at best."

Morton said that when any species of wildlife is faced with possible extinction he would take every action to protect it, under a general mandate given him by Presiden Nixon.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the Endangered Species program, believes that fewer than 2,000 tigers exist in India today, a reduction of over 90 percent in the last 25 years, while probably no more than 400 snow leopards survive in the entire Himalaya Mountains. Probably no more than 2,000 cheetahs exist in the parks of Africa and even the widespread and secretive leopard is being drastically reduced in numbers across its range. Many African and Asian countries have already prohibited any further hunting and export of these animals.

In Latin America, tremendous pressure is being put on the jaguar and the smaller ocelot, margay and tiger cat. Jaguar pelts in recent years have shown a marked decrease in size, an indicator of overexploitation. New highways pushing into Amazon jungles have opened up formerly inaccessible areas to the hide hunters. Little is known of jaguar population densities, but reliable reports on increasing scarcity attest to the effectiveness of the fur gatherers. Mexico has already banned hunting for all wild cats and other Latin American countries have forbidden their export.

Laws against exporting spotted cat skins from Latin America, Asia, and Africa apparently have little effect on the traffic in hides. Despite the commendable efforts of some U.S. furriers to limit the trade in these cats, the U.S. and European markets remain open and the poachers succeed in getting shipments through.

Morton said his Department can do two things for these cats: "Cut off their importation by placing them on the endangered list, and provide technical expertise for their management in countries of their origin." Stopping the U.S. trade will hopefully influence European countries to quickly do the same. "We must act now," Morton said, "because a world without great cats is unthinkable."

The status of the 28 additional species of wild felines occurring in the world has also been thoroughly investigated to see if they should be listed. At present, these show little evidence of commercial exploitation and appear to be abundant in at least some of their range. "If the hide hunters begin to threaten these species," Morton said, "I'll not hesitate in listing them as well."

Certain cat subspecies had earlier been placed on the endangered list and will remain there: the Formosan clouded leopard, Spanish lynx, Barbary serval and Indian lion.

There will be a 30-day waiting period before this action takes effect, during which the Secretary will receive written comments from interested parties. A notice is being published in the Federal Register of the proposed action.