

DHL, Panthera partner to protect leopard

Logistics company DHL has entered into an agreement with Panthera, the world's leading big-cat conservation organisation, to ship faux leopard skins to Africa to help protect the endangered species. Leopard fur is ceremonially worn by followers of the Shembe community in South Africa.



DHL will be shipping on a pro bono basis faux leopard skins from manufacturers in China to South Africa under a contract that extends to May 2015.

Charles Brewer, MD of DHL Express in sub-Saharan Africa said conservation is a major issue in Africa, and for DHL also in this part of the world. "There is a lot of passion for the big five African animals, and elephants and rhinos get a lot of attention. However, there are many endangered species such as the leopard that get little publicity or support."

This innovative animal conservation initiative - designed to protect a species threatened with extinction while at the same time maintaining a long-time South African tradition - was put together by US-based Panthera, whom DHL partnered with as part of its corporate responsibility programme.

Respect for culture

"Panthera's initiative is fantastic and innovative; it respects human culture and traditions as well as the conservation of a magnificent animal, and so we are providing our logistics expertise and raising awareness of a complex issue through our own network and resources. This partnership between Panthera and DHL is a natural fit, as Panthera's big cat expertise combined with DHL's global reach is a winning solution for conservation," Brewer said.

Leopard fur has become customary ceremonial attire worn by the over five million strong members of the Shembe church. Previously worn by Zulu royalty and chiefs, the leopard furs, or amambatha as they are referred to locally, form a ceremonial, religious dress that symbolises beauty, power and prestige. These amambatha are now desired by a growing number of male Shembe followers. At a single Shembe gathering, over 1 000 leopard skins are worn by members. Although many skins are old and are passed down from generation to generation, many new ones are a result of poaching, leading to shrinking leopard numbers.

Willingness to cooperate

Luke Hunter, president of Panthera, said to date 2 000 faux leopard furs have been shipped by DHL for the project. "The Shembe have shown they are willing to embrace the use of our high-quality alternatives to real leopard skin - that translates to 2 000 leopards saved from poachers. We could only have made such major strides in conserving the magnificent leopard with the cooperation of the Shembe and the support of DHL."

Shembe elder and legal advisor, Lizwi Ncwane, stated, "As a leader of the Shembe community, I have seen firsthand how receptive my community is to using these fake skins. Not only do they look and feel like real leopard skins, they also last longer. We're grateful that Panthera has worked with us in finding a solution that interweaves the conservation of leopards with the customs of the Shembe."

Panthera has been working with Shembe leadership to educate its members about the leopard crisis across Southern Africa and has worked with digital designers and clothing companies to create a high-quality, affordable faux leopard skin for use in ceremonies. Panthera's project, which has won the support of Shembe leaders, has been praised by CNN and National Geographic as an innovative conservation solution that respects local cultural practices.

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