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Pashmina goat clone boost for Kashmir's shawl makers

By Athar Parvaiz

SRINAGAR - After scientists in Kashmir successfully cloned the pashmina goat, that produces the famous "cashmere" wool, hopes are running high for the revival of the traditional shawl-making industry in this Indian state.

Noori, a cloned pashmina goat, at Srinagar's Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agriculture Science and Technology (SKUAST), born on March 9, is being seen as just the breakthrough for which the ailing cashmere shawl industry has been looking.

"Noori is the first cloned Pashmina goat in the world and she represents a major breakthrough for us," said Professor Riaz Ahmad Shah at SKUAST's center of animal biotechnology and head of the World Bank-funded cloning project. Shah and his

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team at SKUAST used a simple method involving little more than a microscope and petri dish to produce Noori and the method, now standardized, can readily be replicated through the valley.

Shah told Inter Press Service (IPS) that cloning would not only help increase the number of pashmina goats but also "result in development of animals that can produce finer wool than that from the naturally existing Plasmin goat".

Rafiq Shah, a Srinagar trader, says, "There is no match anywhere in the world for the handspun, tightly-woven pashmina shawl, although duplicates are steadily being pushed into the market with lower price tags."

A greater threat to the cashmere wool industry is the dwindling herds of the delicate pashmina goat, which must be carefully reared in the cold and windy Himalayas to stimulate growth of the fine wool on its underbelly.

"Just imagine the kind of impact that commercially multiplying pashmina goats through cloning would have on the shawl industry," says Gouhar Rather, a handicrafts dealer in Srinagar. "It

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will certainly help genuine pashmina makers."

At least 15,000 families are associated with the pashmina shawl industry in Kashmir with the women closely involved in the spinning of the wool while the men lend a hand with plying the heavy handlooms.

Cashmere shawl sales bring in about US\$85 million a year and, along with tourism, represents a major source of income for the seven million people of the Kashmir Valley.

"Manufacturers in Amritsar and Ludhiana [major woollen goods centers in Punjab state] now import wool from New Zealand and Australia, spin it on machines and treat them with chemicals before passing off second-rate products as pashmina," says Rafiq Shah.

According to Shah, in the past, manufacturers in China and other countries had tried to produce cashmere shawls and failed. "It is not easy to spin pashmina the way our women do."

The making of pashmina shawls, essentially a cottage industry, has long been considered an ideal way for Kashmir's Muslim women to be gainfully employed without having to step out of their homes.

But there are Kashmiri women like Shameema Wani, 42, who have graduated to the marketing of pashmina shawls. She provides work for some 2,000 women, collecting their products for sale at an outlet she set up in the heart of Srinagar about 10 years ago.

"This is a job that is suitable for women because it allows them to attend to household chores and also earn an income," Wani said while welcoming the scientific developments that promise more raw material for shawl-making.

The technology developed at SKUAST can easily be extended to other commercially valuable species in the Himalayas, notably the *chiru*, or Tibetan antelope which produces *shahtoosh*, a type of wool that is even more highly prized than cashmere.

The exceptionally fine fleece of *chiru*, which insulates the animal against the harsh climate of the Tibetan plateau and Kashmir's Ladakh region, has traditionally been woven into *shahtoosh* shawls, another fine handloom product of the Kashmir Valley.

However, as at least four *chirus* must be killed to make a single shawl the animal has had to be placed on the protected list since 1975 by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

In India, *shahtoosh* shawls, once a part of bridal trousseaus, fetched around \$5,000 a piece until the Indian government banned the trade in 1991. The state government of Jammu and Kashmir, which makes its own laws, delayed banning the trade until 2000 to help artisans.

"We are now experimenting with assisted reproduction of the *chiru* and other commercially valuable animal species such as the musk deer," Ahmad Khursheed, wildlife management expert at SKUAST, told IPS.

SKUAST already collaborates with the Laboratory for Conservation of Endangered Species in Hyderabad and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington to conserve several of Kashmir's endangered species, including the *chiru*.

Kashmir's traditional shawl makers, particularly female artisans, suffered heavily from the CITES ban on trade in *chiru* products and there are fears that the art of weaving *shahtoosh* shawls, a preserve of the Kashmir Valley, may vanish altogether.

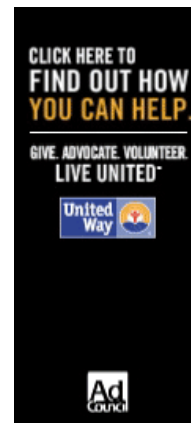
"We have undertaken conservation breeding of the *chiru* and have developed a technique for combing out its wool without killing the animal," Khursheed said.

(Inter Press Service)

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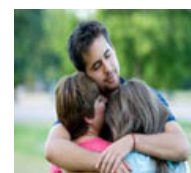
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