**What Do Scientists Call Snow Leopards?**

Snow leopards have had a number of names since they first came to the attention of Europeans. The word, “leopard” comes to us from two Greek words that mean leon pard or lion cat. Words change over time, and so the “n” slipped away and the two words slammed together. In a similar way, snow leopards were once known as ounce. The name might come from Latin: luncea which means lynx. In French the word became lonce which was altered over time to l’once because French speakers thought the “L” meant “the”. Eventually, the “L” fell off and the name became, simply, once and that became, in English, ounce. These days, among English speaking people, snow leopards are most commonly known as... snow leopards. French speakers call them panth�re des neiges, and Spanish speakers call them leopardo nival.

Snow leopards also have many names in the east where they live. In Nepal, snow leopards are called Heung chituwa; in Tibet they are Sah or Shen; in Russia and Mongolia they are Irbis, and in Urdu, one of the languages of central Asia, they are Barfani chita.

Those scientists who think about what to call all living things have, themselves, been given a name. They are called taxonomists. Taxonomy is the orderly classification of plants and animals according to their presumed natural relationships. In other words, taxonomists try to group living things with other, similar, living things. It’s a way of knowing who is related to whom. Sometimes, as we will see, it isn’t easy.

Taxonomists place the snow leopard in the Kingdom, Animalia, because they are animals, not plants or bacteria. They are placed in the Phylum, chordata because they have spinal cords unlike crabs, for instance. They are further placed in the Class, mamalia because snow leopard mothers nurse their young. They are placed in the Order carnivora because, (like your brother) they won’t eat their vegetables. They only eat meat. Snow leopards are placed in the Familyfelidae with includes animals such as the cougar, the lion, the tiger, the cheetah and the tabby curled up on your bed.

Ok, we’re getting closer and closer to naming snow leopards, and it starts to get difficult here. Taxonomists have been arguing about exactly what genus snow leopards should be placed in. Some believe they should have their own genus. So, the snow leopard would be Uncia uncia. Other taxonomists would group them with the Panthera, lions, tigers, jaguars and leopards, and call them Panthera uncia. There’s a roaring debate about this question – that is, the Panthera can all roar. The snow leopard, although it has similar anatomical structure to the Panthera, can’t – not really.

So, to answer the question in red at the top of the page: most scientists now call snow leopards Uncia uncia though a few still call them Panthera uncia. What do you think they should be called?