

Poaching: Get a grip on it

To prevent wildlife trade, we are limited by our defective activity

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One of the causes of critical species depletion in the world is the increasing demand for wildlife products. Poaching, for example of rhinoceros, has long been rampant in Nepal, and has recently been facilitated by the reordered priorities and shifting constraints of the current emergency. The best hope for stopping or reducing the illegal exploitation of protected species lies in the empowerment and involvement of local people in conservation work. Better training, modern communication equipment, and reorganization of the anti-poaching units would prove beneficial in reversing a disturbing trend that threatens to undo even the limited successes of the past three decades of conservation.

Poaching and illegal trade in endangered species and products made from them are serious problems in biodiversity conservation, second only to habitat destruction. Exploitation of "protected" wildlife for profit is not a recent phenomenon. Despite strict legislation, rhino horns, tiger and leopard skins, bones and other animal parts are as profitable as narcotic drugs in international markets. The rapid expansion of human population and, concomitantly, of transport and communication systems have contributed to an increase in the scope of this exploitation. Increasing demand for wildlife products and increasingly ruthless means of supplying them have led to critical species depletions around the world.

The 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), seeks international co-operation to protect listed wildlife species against over-exploitation, including their trade. Nepal as a party to CITES has an obligation to control the trade of products made from any parts of wildlife that are protected, endangered or threatened with extinction. The present status of wildlife poaching and trade in Nepal is most alarming (1, 2). Among mammals, the rhino seems to have been most affected by the emergency period in Nepal. Most rhino deaths are attributable to poachers; rhinoceros horn is in great de-

mand primarily as an aphrodisiac, and (in Arab countries) for carved scabbards. In 2000 the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation reported a total of 612 rhinoceros in Nepal (2, 3). In July 15, 2000-July 14, 2001 the official tally of deaths, both natural and by poaching, was 30; 55 rhino deaths were reported for July 15, 2001-July 14, 2002. For July 15, 2002-July 14, 2003, the unpublished tally of rhinoceros killed by poachers in Chitwan and Bardiya is 55. The figures represent a fatality rate of nearly 17% for the period July 15, 2001-July 14, 2002, compared with a birthrate of approximately 3.7% (3). The real death rate is probably twice as high as the reported incidence.

Is there any prospect of checking the slaughter? Yes, there is hope. For example, 38 army posts in Royal Chitwan National Park were cut back to nine in response to the Maoist insurgency (2). Park range posts and patrolling activities were reduced because of factors such as lack of security, budget reduction, and lack of supervision from higher authority; such security measures occurred in most protected areas of Nepal. By the start of 2002 rhino poaching had increased substantially, threatening the sustainability of Nepal's notably successful rhino conservation. What happened? Poachers simply felt more comfortable. Their activity has been facilitated by the reduced numbers of people in the park, and especially by the fact that the wardens responsible for protecting wildlife have been afraid to patrol and take open action against poachers or wildlife traders.

It is well known that the dirty work of poaching in Nepal is carried out by some local residents employed by local businessmen. To reduce the incidence of poaching, it is imperative to empower local commu-

nities. Buffer Zone Management Committees as well as Community Forests Users' Groups and Conservation Areas Committees are examples of proven forest management regimes which have effectively controlled wildlife poaching by taking responsibility, protecting rights, and sharing benefits at the community level. The community can and should be involved in conservation work within the protected area, which includes informing authorities of illegal activities. Once basic needs are met these communities will be cooperative with conservation programmes.

The next step that must be taken in order to control poaching is redeployment of the Army in all the previously designated posts inside the National Park. Range posts, personnel and logistical support must also be re-established. Nepal's open border with India, and the lack of specific legislation and co-ordination between the concerned authorities continue to hinder the task of combating wildlife trade. Lack of commitment among the implementing officials is a major hurdle to stop the wildlife trade. We need trained officials equipped with modern communication equipment. The structure and functioning of anti-poaching units is defective, as they generally involve informants who were once poachers themselves. Such people have a tendency to revert to their previous activities when conditions seem more propitious, thereby sharing their insider's knowledge and skills with illegal traffickers. In reality it is helping to wildlife traders for doing their business easily. What we need is a new kind anti-poaching unit, involving both outside experts and local oversight. Ultimately, the best solution is to convince the consumers of illegal wildlife products that their consumption can lead to the extinction of the animals, thereby reducing the demand that drives the entire industry (4). Finally, we need a strong law and its effective enforcement that will strike a balance between utilitarian value and protecting wildlife for their own intrinsic value. A law with teeth. ■

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