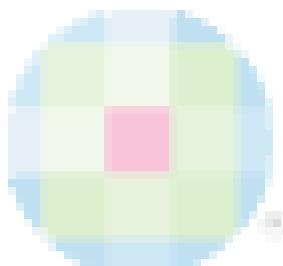


## Kings as Wardens and Wardens as Kings: Post-Rana Ties between Nepali Royalty and National Park Staff

Nina Bhatt

*This article locates Nepali national park staff (game scouts, rangers and park wardens) in the context of their historical ties with monarchy. The pre-andolan (1951–90) accounts by park staff show how their individual and collective identities were shaped through encounters with royalty, which informed their everyday practices. The social relations, professional goals, and familial desires envisioned by government servants were linked to their perceived closeness with the Nepali kings and through specific events such as royal hunts. Historically, park staff have displayed particularly strong regard and allegiances for the royal family since Nepali kings sanctioned much of Nepal's early conservation efforts and because monarchs espoused close ties with these officials in the setting up of national parks.*



### INTRODUCTION

NATIONAL PARK STAFF in Nepal have traditionally viewed the Nepalese royal family in varied and often mutually conflicting ways.<sup>1</sup> Royals were avid hunters, yet became selfless conservationists.<sup>2</sup> Royals were the consumers of nature for private amusement, yet in quick succession they demarcated forested lands in the interest of public consumption and national good.<sup>3</sup> For most game park staff, any encounters with the royal family in the nature preserves are a source of inspiration fundamental to identity construction.<sup>4</sup>

The 1990 revolution (*andolan*) was a watershed in the relationship between royalty and rangers.<sup>5</sup> During the pre-*andolan* period (1951–90),<sup>6</sup> the royal family's interest in nature and in the well-being of park bureaucrats (expressed by frequent personal visits) was crucial in shaping a largely positive world-view for government officials. After 1990 the multiple and vested interests of politicians, international aid workers, Western conservation ideology, non-government organisations (NGOs) and donor aid began to compete with the previously unchallenged authority of state officials, resulting in a period of bureaucratic angst.

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The pre-*andolan* accounts by national park staff of their encounters with royalty consist of intimate, memorable encounters that occur in the Protected Areas. Starting in 1951, when the royal family regained control of the country from the Rana family, official visits to Protected Areas became a semi-annual event involving much pomp and splendour. While King Mahendra designated the first Protected Area only in 1964,<sup>7</sup> visits to the interior of jungles for respite were important events as far back as the late nineteenth century. When King Tribhuvan (Mahendra's father) in 1951 sought asylum with the Indian government before regaining control from the Ranas, he conveyed his family members out of the palace grounds on the pretext that they were going on a hunting expedition.

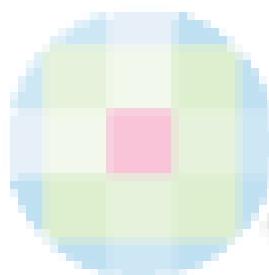
*Shikar* (hunting) was just one of the ways in which officials with the national park services enjoyed meaningful royal encounters. Royal hunts (*savaris*) to national parks, directives from the palace, encounters in Kathmandu and the prominent role of the palace in international conservation were additional means by which bureaucrats sought to forge unique identities vis-à-vis the royal family. Likewise, these events were used by the royal family to forge durable loyalty and allegiance.

#### THE SHIKAR SAVARIS (ROYAL HUNTS)

Royal hunts<sup>8</sup> in Protected Areas, which ended in 1990, meant many things to many people. From the perspectives of forestry and national park staff involved in the organisation of these hunts, *shikar* was an opportunity for a royal show of splendour, display of power and even relaxation—a means by which the royal elite escaped the pressures of life in the capital.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the pleasure of escape to the jungle, staff (especially senior staff) understood that the retreats were events of political and socio-economic importance of 'statecraft' and as a 'rite of passage'<sup>10</sup> as one senior wildlife expert and close friend of the royal family recently remarked.<sup>11</sup> That the hunt was an important, almost an unquestioned right of royalty was understood by the park staff. Officials often described hunting as the royal family's 'hobby'—it was what they did, it was what they were fond of doing. The hunts of King Mahendra and his son Birendra were similar in pomp and splendour, but reveal important differences in the nature of the two kings, which sheds light on their politics, views of democracy and the state.

#### From the Capital to the Outskirts

Movement between the *rajdhani* (capital in Kathmandu) to extended stays in the national parks in the *terai*<sup>12</sup> (principally Royal Chitwan where there was a *raja's* *durbar*) has its precedents in history. Prithvi Narayan Shah (founder of modern Nepal) used to transfer his summer court to the palace in Kathmandu and his winter court to a type of 'tent city' in Nuwakot in the hills (Kirkpatrick 1811: 17, taken from Burghart 1996: 242). The movement of the court between seasonal capitals had been a Gorkhali custom since the founding of the kingdom by Dravya Shah in 1559 (Vajracarya 1975: 146, taken from Burghart 1996).



These movements, which entailed much logistical difficulties, had to do with retaining power in areas described as the hills and the plains. The original hillmen from Prithvi's entourage also displayed strong preferences for the air and conditions of the hills to those of the plains (Burghart 1996). In the more recent past Nepali kings' extended stays in national parks had to do with rest and respite from the intrigues of Kathmandu life, but it also concerned the love of hunting and, importantly, a way of collecting information in areas removed from the centre.

#### DYNAMICS OF DISINFORMATION: GENTRIFYING VILLAGES FOR THE HUNTING ENTOURAGE

Arrangements for the hunt were overseen by the *shikar toli* (hunting team), which came in advance of the king. This party included the army (for security arrangements), members of the fitting *toli* (to set up tents) and the *durbar toli* (to oversee palace logistics). All of these came at least one month before the king, while park staff would begin preparations several months in advance. Duties of the *tolis* varied and were made more complex by the fact that in the earlier days of *shikar*, road conditions were poor and many basic goods and services were not easily available.

In a group interview with five game park rangers (ages 27 to 47) from the western *terai* region, the senior rangers had participated in nine royal hunts, while the youngest in none. What the older rangers recalled most vividly was the entourage—the large retinue that included military officials, medical doctors, the director-general of national parks, ministers, secretaries, marksmen, royal relatives and close family friends. When asked what sort of preparations were involved before the king arrived, one of the rangers said:

All of us were in a state of alert. There was this business of *mamat* [repair], of *sudar* [of fixing] to take care of. *Basne thao milaune* [setting up the living areas], *sar safai* [cleaning] and we had to paint homes that are *waripari* [nearby]. There used to be a *savari* budget and people [government officials] even took from other budgets. Even at the district level, there would be *bato ko mamat*. *Sadar mukam samma janne chalan thiyo* [there was the system of fixing things all the way to the district headquarters].

Thus, a larger objective or task of the national park staff and that of other government officials was to temporarily gentrify the area for the royals, especially for the king. This type of insulation from seeing true village poverty is not unusual—it happens even today when foreign dignitaries visit Nepal, or even when senior expatriate NGO advisers visit projects in the countryside.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of the *shikar toli* was to make it easier for the king to hunt. One of the rangers who had witnessed nine hunts said that the *shikar toli* was largely defined by the royal family, but anyone could be included. Even ordinary people who were good marksmen (*sidha haath le hanna sakne*) would be taken along.

These were professional *jagire* (salaried) people. Generally, at least one military officer would be part of the *shikar toli*.

In order to facilitate the king's experience of the hunt, large retinues of game scouts would drive a tiger, sometimes from as far as 36 km to a designated area using large white sheets.<sup>14</sup> While many are familiar with the contrived pictures of the hunt from British India as well as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Nepal, game scouts, rangers as well as officers mentioned that photographs, unless with official permission, were not allowed, thus there is no public media documentation of many of the intricacies of the hunt.

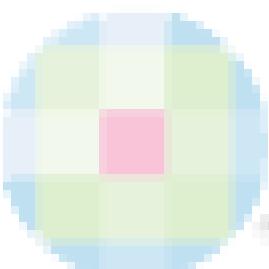
#### THE HUNT UNDER KING MAHENDRA

Mahendra is known as a great lover of *shikar* and, in fact, had a heart attack at the age of just fifty-one while he was out on a hunting expedition in Royal Chitwan National Park in 1972. He died not long after. Kirti Nidhi Bista, former prime minister and close confidante of Mahendra says:

He was so passionate about hunting that whenever he saw wild animals, he couldn't resist. It was a tremendous temptation, even after he had his first heart attack. That actually happened when I was with him in a hunting hide. I held him in my arms until help came. But even after that, he didn't give up his sport. (Gregson 2002: 109)<sup>15</sup>

Mahendra hunted every winter season, an unsurprising fact since the tradition of the hunt was a marker of the highest rank. The right to engage in *shikar* in terai forests hearkens back to the days of Rana rule when the Rana minister would set off from Kathmandu sometimes with entourages that 'numbered several thousand' (ibid. : 91). The king, crown prince, top generals and other leading Ranas would usually take part in these hunting expeditions. Several hundred trained elephants and thousands of local guides and beaters were employed to corral all the wildlife within a cordoned area after which they were funnelled into designated killing grounds. There the honoured guests would be waiting, either in a hide raised on poles or mounted on elephants. On one occasion more than 300 tigers were killed in a single hunt (ibid. : 92).

The prodigious scale of hunting expeditions in the Nepali *terai* (plains) was unusual. But similar shoots went on all over India under the Mughals (Ali 1927); the British (Bennett 1984; Best 1932); and especially in the quasi-independent princely states whose rulers liked to hide political impotence behind a façade of luxury and ostentation, and curry favour with the colonial government by offering their hunting grounds (Greenough 2001; Rangarajan 2000, 2001). John MacKenzie's (1988) descriptions of the hunt as serving complex psychological functions for British officers (mainly that it dramatised their manly virtues and ceremonialised existing social hierarchies) are important for locating the hunt in Nepal in the context of leadership, power and rule.



Hunting was also tied to Rana political intrigue of the times. The Rana family encouraged the Shah kings to engage in the hunt since it was included in the list of frivolity and amusements (others included women, alcohol and drugs). These pastimes were intended to encourage the dissipation of the Shah kings' characters so as to make it less likely that they would challenge Rana rule (Gregson 2002; Rana 1999; Sever 1996).

Narratives on the hunt collected under the reigns of Kings Mahendra (1955–72) and Birendra (1972–2001) are similar in their description of how it occurred, the exhaustive preparations involved, the amount of manpower recruited and the vast resources involved. Perhaps the greatest diversity that emerges is the attitude towards wildlife and the extent of the kill. While this data has been reported to be recorded, it is tightly held by the palace bureaucracy.

A former conservator with the forestry ministry, now long retired, recalled how he arranged *shikar* for King Mahendra in Bardia district. The king's visit lasted about three weeks during *bikram samvat* 2020–21.<sup>16</sup> Camp was being set up for the king, and this forester was to accompany him on a hunt for one week. The conservator recalled his travel with the king, and his ADC Sher Bahadur Malla in a Land Rover. He also remembered some of the difficulties involved in establishing camp:

It took us two months to make a camp. There were no roads. Also, it was difficult to prepare for tiger *shikar* since tigers are in a particular place, in this case their watering holes were 36 km away. For *jarayo shikar* [deer species], we used to do *savari* on elephants.

On this particular trip, it appears that King Mahendra was on a larger tour that extended from Kathmandu to the remote regions of Rara or Jumla. The now elderly officer recalls being asked by Mahendra, 'What is the botanical name of our national flower?' Then the king gave half the answer to the officer to prompt him. This official was profoundly impressed by this exchange and, in his opinion, it meant Mahendra was a 'highly-informed' man and that the 'king knew so much about everything'! Despite the fact that this incident was being narrated twenty years later, the officer said he was embarrassed at being unable to do a better job. He said *aftayaro lagyo* ([I] felt uncomfortable) because he had only recently arrived in the district with essentially no resources at his disposal with the exception of one Land Rover.

Mahendra's contributions are felt even by those who never met him. 'Sujata', a young female project officer in Thakurdwara, Bardia district, gushed about this monarch's contributions in her field:

King Mahendra was—what shall I say? path breaking in his initiatives. For instance, he established Mahendra Kunj in Bharatpur [later renamed Royal Chitwan National Park]. This was his winter retreat, but he established many other Protected Areas as well, such as Rara Lake.

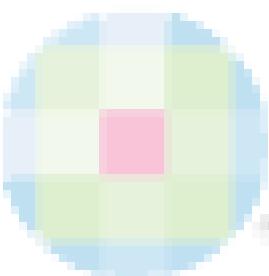
What is interesting about the narratives regarding Mahendra is that seemingly modest acts of conservation were viewed as 'path breaking' by Nepalis working in these fields.

#### THE HUNT UNDER KING BIRENDRAD

Birendra was less fond of *shikar* compared to his father. He shot his first tiger in the Royal Chitwan National Park more as a rite of passage (Beinart and Coates 1995, Gregson 2002) than as sport; he never was a big game hunter. But then again, the general period of Birendra's ascendance into kingship (January 1972) coincided with key efforts in the conservation world. In neighbouring India, Project Tiger got under way as Indian princes were putting aside their rifles and turning into big-time conservationists. Mahesh Rangarajan describes how it was only in the Indira Gandhi period (1966–77, 1980–84) that wildlife conservation took centre stage as 'salvaging the wild became critical to a more self-confident notion of nationalism' (2000: 8). In 1973 the tiger was recognised as an endangered species, and in Nepal the new king supported the creation of protected zones, especially under the establishment of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation. Also, in 1973 the National Parks Act was passed (it was revised in 1994 to incorporate revenue sharing provisions generated by parks with local communities).<sup>17</sup>

But royal visits to the national park under Birendra continued and are remembered as some of the most significant events in the careers of national park and wildlife officials in the days of *pandayat* rule.<sup>18</sup> The elaborate preparations involved in setting up camp provide vivid descriptions of security arrangements, the hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion, the excitement experienced by park staff and, most importantly, the rise of their status during this period. Pleasing monarchs yielded rich results. A royal *hukum* (command) could result in multiple promotions overnight as it did for several national park officials. This is something that certainly would not happen in post-1990 Nepal. The following description of the preparations for the hunt is by a retired accountant who has been in Bardia since the early days when the park boundaries were being demarcated:

Whenever there was His Majesty's *savari*, the whole police department came. There used to be *chowkis* [police posts] in all the borders. This was for security reasons. The army came from Kathmandu. Generals, Colonels, battalions came. *Raja ko durbar* [the king's tent] used to be set up. They used to bring *daura* [wood], *kila* [nails] from outside the jungle. Some took some home. This was all to set up the tents for the Raja. *Savaris* usually lasted several days. All the *sachivs* [secretaries] came as well. At that time we felt that Kathmandu was made here. I personally saw four *savaris* of Birendra *sarkar*. Sometimes, *Himalaya* and *Basundhara* *sarkars* [the king's uncles] came with him.



A senior ranger from Bardia who has witnessed nine royal hunts recalls how in Birendra's time between sixty to seventy elephants would arrive from as far as Kosi Tappu nature reserve:

*Desh bhari ko hatti jamma hunthiyo* [all the country's elephants gathered]. The army was in charge of camp *bevastha* [arrangements]. Free mess was there for people. National park *bhitra* army *ko* duty *thiyo*, outside, police *ko* duty *thiyo* [inside the national parks the army was on duty and outside, the police was on duty].

At the time of these *savaris*, all attention shifted to the national park officials. Their importance rose in the eyes of all other government officials, as did their sense of self-esteem. A former district forest officer (DFO), now working for the United National Development Programme in Kathmandu, remembered how the estimation of wardens rose in the eyes of other district-level officers. At this time, local politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs), would wait outside the park boundaries in hopes of an audience with the king.

What emerges from narratives of these royal hunts was that these were highly festive, yet disciplined and controlled events. At the present time it is difficult to imagine these royal visits since park headquarters are typically devoid of people (there are only some park officials and a few tourists). But prior to 1990 during these royal visits there would be:

generals, secretaries, and tent workers. Over a 1,000 people used to be inside! There were 60–70 tents in the *phantas* [grasslands]. The army would be around the main tent, around the *raja ko durbar* [king's tent] and the *rauni* [queen] came every time as well, as did his younger brothers Gyanendra and Thirendra.

Feasting on these occasions represented crucial moments in the lives of park staff, especially those at the lower levels. Memories of free food, extra *bhittha* (allowance) and general excitement is what one game scout from Thumani Post is left with. He remembered a *savari* he witnessed in the Royal Chitwan National Park:<sup>19</sup>

In *savari*, there was *shikar* from the king. *Tyas pachi hamilai rama ilo anubhav pani hunthiyo* [after that, we had happy understanding]. We used to get *savari bhittha* [royal visit allowance]. That was Rs 10 per day. This was in *Bikram samvat* 2043 [A.D. 1986].

Wild meat was highly prized, especially the wild fowl for which King Birendra was known to have a special fondness:

Raja loved to eat wild fowl though. He always wanted to have that while here. We would chase the wild fowl outside the park, since according to law, you cannot kill inside the park boundaries. Palace *shikaris* would then kill them.

Birendra was depicted as contemplative, needing peace and quiet. When he entertained, it was in a very disciplined manner. The visits to the park were part of his royal touring duties, but it was also a time for *ramailo* or enjoyment:<sup>20</sup>

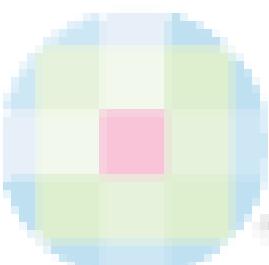
It was all *shanti* [peace]. There was no noise. Drinking was only one time in the evenings. The camp was very disciplined. No loud voices. It was very peaceful. And this was despite there being over 1,000 people. The only noise we heard was that of vehicles. Cameras were not allowed. Outsiders were not allowed. The only hustle and bustle we heard was from the army and that was before the king arrived. Morning to night, the programme was very, very tight. During the king's visit, we'd be up by 4 A.M. None knew which *chetra* [area] the king would visit that day.

#### HUNTING QUOTAS

Besides wanting peace and quiet, the royals came to the parks to hunt. The park staff understand that hunting for mere pleasure is unacceptable in today's environmental context. Their recollections of the hunt (actual numbers of kill) vary. According to a senior park official, during Birendra's time:

before the king hunted, a committee with representatives from the palace, the department of national parks and others sat down and developed guidelines and quotas for the king, queen and others in the entourage. Certain animals [such as the tiger] were off limits. Once an animal was killed, it was weighed, assessed and all its characteristics were recorded. Then only was the animal taken from the shooting site and brought back to the camping grounds. People used to think: *raja aayo, raja le sabai mane paucha* [the king has come, the king can kill everything] but that was simply untrue. Actually, what the king came for was to observe, to do research. The *niyam* [rule] in the days was that you couldn't kill tiger. Only deer, *neelgai* [black buck], and wild boar were allowed. Tigers, leopards, and females could not be killed.

The king was seen as a natural conservationist with much affection for wildlife. When park staff was asked why the king hunted, they vaguely said it was because of some hard-to-specify sense of duty. The answers were generally that 'it was a ritual', 'an old habit', or 'it was *manoranjan*' (for fun). Several officers from the group claimed the king would kill only old deer. When asked why the king did not hunt to his heart's content, a retired official said, 'Maybe the king did not



want to bring *baijati* [shame] upon himself. This is why the *samiti* [referring to the palace wildlife committee] decided how much [the] raja would hunt.'

John Mackenzie (1988) writes of how British officials in colonial India followed an unwritten code of honour that included not killing pregnant females. In a similar manner, Nepali park officials construct Nepali royalty as fair-minded individuals who loved wildlife and who hunted out of duty. But since royalty were part of the meeting to decide on hunting quotas, it is difficult to imagine how park officials could contest the suggestions made by the royals. Instead, these were valuable opportunities for park staff to ingratiate favours with the palace by insisting on a generous quota. But some park officials choose to not narrate history in this way. A retired Bardia park official recalls:

The committee always worked with *sano awaj* [small noise, meaning without quibbling]; and that in fact, Prince Gyanendra<sup>21</sup> [who would also sit in on these meetings] would always cut down on quotas even if others raised it. There was no *chakri* [pleasing, currying favours] involved. Everyone was *samajdari manche* [mature men]. Raja's family themselves would say you can't kill too much.<sup>22</sup>

But others remember a less favourable outcome for wildlife. A retired warden recalled that in the year after the Bardia National Park was established in 1976, there was a palace hunt and during this expedition the king's uncles (Princes Basundhara and Himalaya) had arrived with the king to do *shikar*:

There were *bail nimmis* [quotas] of who would kill, and how much. The royal entourage asked me about it but I didn't know how these things worked so I asked Hemanta Mishra [a prominent wildlife specialist]. There wasn't much *shikar* that year but in the following year, Lava Raja [an uncle] showed a photo to the king to prove to him how much the herd had increased. This was the only such photograph from those times and it was to persuade the king to come back [for hunting].

It turns out that if the king did not deplete his hunting quota then the *raja ko manas* (uncles on the maternal side) were entitled to the remaining quota. According to the park staff, they could only draw on the king's quota after he had departed. Perhaps it was to dissociate himself from the killings that would be in keeping with King Birendra's ambivalent feelings towards the hunt. But since these quotas expired after a few days, the king would give *hukum* (permission, order) to his uncles to hunt.

Opinions vary on how the stewards of wildlife and national parks understood these hunts. Some felt the king understandably needed to release tension, but others would say the hunt occurred precisely because he loved wildlife. It was the

king's way of 'conducting research'. When rangers were asked to elaborate on this point, they gave examples such as:

Why, the king would climb onto a *machan* [tower house] and then have park staff *gherao* [surround] a tiger on all sides with a white sheet just so he could observe the animal to his heart's content. Why else would he do that unless he needed to study the tiger?

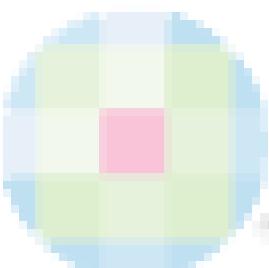
#### **ROYAL BAGS**

Unlike the data on Indian hunting blitzes described by Greenough (2001) and Rangarajan (2000, 2001), accurate numbers on royal bags for Nepal are hard to come by. Interviews with actual participants or observers of these hunts reveals a wide discrepancy on how prodigious the kills actually were. Accounts by rangers who witnessed many of these hunts (presumably without any reason to over-report the killings) would indicate that the extent of wildlife hunted was greater than many senior government and palace officials lead us to believe.

Because the narrative constructed by national park officials is that Nepali royals have a deep conservation ethic (the popular example is that royals established the Protected Areas), park officials are conflicted about how to justify the hunt.<sup>23</sup> Many reconciled it as a royal duty, a task that the king necessarily had to perform. But some of the narratives (by retired officials) are much less sympathetic to the hunt. Many of these officers have spent their entire adult lives in the jungles away from families and friends. For such staff the senselessness of the hunt was unjustifiable by any account:

They [palace] killed, did as much *shikar* as they wanted to. Especially after the king left, the remaining people used to just get onto *haathis* [elephants] and randomly kill whatever was in sight. Why, when I was in Bardia, the king killed a record number of tigers. How can you say that the palace had a conservation ethic? The world had stopped killing tigers long ago. In fact, WWF told Nepal royalty that they had to stop killing tigers. Maybe Birendra was different, I never witnessed *shikar* under him. I'm talking about Mahendra [the father of the present king].

Several rangers now serving in the western *terai* (plains) Protected Areas expressed great happiness that such areas were established, but they felt that, 'raja ko swarath [king's selfishness] was involved in hunting'. In interviews with rangers who helped arrange these hunts during the *panchayat* years, their sympathy is clearly on the side of the conservation: 'We always felt they shouldn't kill. *Thula, bada* [the big and powerful] should not be allowed to do whatever they want.'



#### **RATIONALISING THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY HUNT**

One important way in which park staff rationalised the hunt was by acknowledging its ritual importance. According to Hindu *shastras* (sacred texts), offerings made from the horn of a rhino resulted in departed ones gaining direct entry to the heavens. The retired forestry official who was unsympathetic to the uncurbed royal appetites regarding the hunt, described a few pages ago, conceded that this aspect was understandable. For this Brahmin forester, the idea that royalty would want 'an entire rhino, to remove all its flesh, and drape its hide around their offerings to the heavens during *shradha* [death ritual]' was perfectly understandable. In this context, the hunt was accepted as legitimate.

The royals' fondness for elephants (they are said to bring good luck) is seen in other more playful areas. During Birendra's *shikar* as king during the 1970s, the young monarch apparently took childish delight in assigning colours to each elephant:

When they came on royal visits, the king would assign *patuka* [cummerbund] colours. Each elephant generally has three *mahouts*. So if it was a twelve elephant *savari* then there were thirty-six *mahouts*. The king enjoyed shouting 'red! blue! green!' and would make cummerbund colour assignations to distinguish the *mahouts* and the elephants.<sup>24</sup>

Rangarajan (2001), in his account of India's wildlife history, discusses the importance of culling of royal operations against wild prey which was perceived as being the same as slaying enemies. In Rangarajan's (1999) account of the hunt in Mughal India, the killing of ferocious beasts or the deer that raided corn were acts of merit. While there is no evidence that the hunt by Nepali royals was performed as an act of social merit, the need for culling from a conservation perspective was often used to justify the hunt:

The king's brother and his friend were the worst. They'd use the excuse of culling to kill wildlife. They'd use technical jargon and dupe the king into *shikar*.

But the pretext of the royalty needing rest and relaxation was also the opportunity by which they gathered key political, administrative and military leaders in the jungle. These were important settings for reconnaissance to get a sense of public sentiments towards the monarchy, particularly in remote areas, and to gather intelligence from the border areas.<sup>25</sup> Drawing parallels to the Mughals, hunts became ritualised activities laden with political meaning (*ibid.*).

## HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL PARKS DEPARTMENT

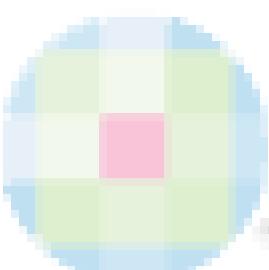
Modern conservation practices in Nepal that began in 1973 with the National Parks Act coincided with wildlife conservation efforts under way in India (Rangarajan 2000). The office that was established in 1972 to oversee Protected Areas' management was upgraded to a department in 1980 with objectives of ecosystem conservation, wildlife protection as well as the economic and cultural empowerment of local people living adjacent to Protected Areas.<sup>26</sup> At present, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) oversees eight national parks, four wildlife reserves, three conservation areas, one hunting reserve and five buffer zones around national parks.<sup>27</sup> These Protected Areas cover 26,696 sq. km or 18.14 per cent of the land (DNPWC 2001). The DNPWC is one of five faculties under the Ministry of Forestry (MoF).<sup>28</sup>

Today, the DNPWC has a staff of about 1,000, most of whom are based in Protected Areas as wardens, rangers, game scouts, accountants and administrative officers. Typically, a park official will spend twenty years in the field (away from urban areas) before he is promoted high enough or is sufficiently well connected to be transferred to Kathmandu.<sup>29</sup> There are hardly any female staffers, but the gender imbalance does not appear unusual in the context of national park settings globally. The Makalu-Barun National Park in eastern Nepal reportedly was the first Asian park to hire female game scouts but even for this park the ratio of females to males was 11:82 (Bhatt 1996). While the national parks department staff follow His Majesty's government's rules and regulations that delineate procedures for salary, promotion, transfers, leave of absence from work and educational leave among other things this department has been provided with additional perks similar to army servicemen, including government provision of year-round ration, clothes and special field allowances. King Birendra was responsible for establishing these privileges.

That the monarchs played a central role in the early history of Protected Area management is undisputed. In India the attention paid to the tiger trickled to Nepal as well (McDougal 1980, 1988). The interest in tigers was related to the establishment of national parks. That parks were established in large measure to protect wildlife is clear from many accounts (Ranjitsinh 1982; Uperti 1985, 1994).<sup>30</sup> In the case of Nepal such initiatives are seen by conservationists as emanating from the palace, especially the king. During the early years park staff appeared to play a passive role, with little display of any form of agency. Today the role formerly played by the palace can arguably be seen to be taken over by the international conservation community.

## ENCOUNTERING THE KING, ENCOUNTERING THE SELF

Perhaps some of the most significant experiences in the lives of wildlife officials were their direct and close encounters with the king. These encounters (which ceased after multi-party democracy was established in 1991) typically occurred



during the king's annual regional tours to remote district areas.<sup>31</sup> For one warden, who is now with an international conservation organisation, Nepali royalty's contribution to Protected Area management is similar to the prominent role played in wildlife management by Indian *rajas*, or the contribution to philanthropy made by the Rockefellers. The concern in India for conservation trickled down to Nepal in several ways. As Indian rulers turned from hunters to conservationists, this ethic affected the sentiment of Nepali rulers. While I address these issues in detail elsewhere, Indian influences were seen through the training of Nepali forestry and park staff in Dehradun, India; the Nepali royalty's marriage alliances with Indian scions; and the role of Western conservation ideology—some of which came via India.

But Nepali park bureaucrats viewed the kings as not only crucial to the protection of wildlife, but also to their personal identity construction. Park officials saw the king's *savari* as the ideal opportunity to try to impress him and those close to him. Since the king was often in a 'relaxed, open mood, amenable to hearing suggestions and grievances', bureaucrats strove to use this opportunity to their advantage.

A senior officer with the MoF and former director general of national parks described his days as warden:

*raja ko savari* [king's visits] was a moral boost. *Hamro* social prestige *maathi hunthiyo* [our social prestige went up] in the eyes of the district administrators. They could not *pelo* [harass] us because *raja* gave us our moral ground. People said that DNPWC was less corrupt because of links with the palace. But that was not because we had *dar* [fear] but because we were good. We felt we were nationally important.

This link to morality and increase in prestige sanctioned by the king also reinforced park officials' conservation ethic:

It was unthinkable for us to kill a tiger and sell its skin. It was part of our prestige that we were honest. We would lose our prestige if we engaged in corruption. It was considered reprehensible to kill a deer. Ram Prit Yadav [a well-known park official] would not eat any *sukuti* [dried meat] for fear it might be deer meat.

When *savari* ceased, a broader governmental malaise seems to have taken over. Bureaucrats lost their moral boost, remote postings lost much of their charm. The work ethic injected by the king, in many ways similar to what Kennedy did for the Peace Corps, and, closer to home, the inspiration that Bhutanese foresters drew from Jigme Wangchuk, was lost:

After 1990, lots of people don't stay here [in the hills] anymore. I think its because the palace doesn't do *savari* anymore. People used to have a sense of responsibility. In the last two years, 100 rhinos have died because of poaching.

Now there is no system of reporting to really think about it. There are 100 rhinos dead.

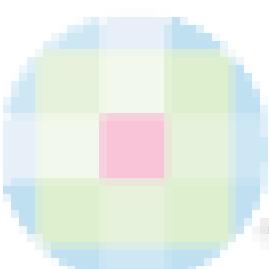
The acting warden of Bardia National Park at the time of my doctoral research was Shiv Raj Bhatta, who recalls his days as a young ranger in the Rara National Park, which is located at the high-altitude area of 10,000 feet. Bhatta reminisced about the time the king arrived unexpectedly at the Rara National Park many years ago by helicopter:

The king just landed. It was a Saturday and I had not yet shaved nor taken a bath. My beard was two days old. The king then made a remark about having arrived on a Saturday [holiday]. At first, I was nervous, maybe for the first ten minutes or so, you know, he is the king. But then I was completely at ease. He just chatted! He asked me two personal questions: where I was from and where I studied. His way of addressing me was '*timro park ma ke kam huncha?*' [is there any work being accomplished in your park?] He kept saying '*timro*' [informal 'you'] and even I began saying '*mero park ma*' [my park, using the personal possessive]. When the king made references, he used '*mero*' [personal possessive too]. The king ate lunch alone at Rara. Apparently that is what they always do. Afterwards, the king pointed to a structure [the warden pointed out an NGO office] like that and said: 'What is that?' I told the king that it was my housing quarters and the king said 'lets go there and look at maps'. I took him to my quarters and then taped the maps down on the bed. There was nothing in the room. Just a simple table and chair.

The warden took this incident as being an intimate encounter with the king. Despite the passage of almost fifteen years since that incident, he was touched that royalty would ask personal questions, enter his humble living quarters, use language that was familiar, intimate and encouraging.

The wonder that was the king, his conservation ethic and his presence as well as power, provided the ethos by which park officials justified their work. Their close relationship with the king (to their mind) helped wardens partake in a bit of kingship themselves. Even ordinary citizens around them realised this. One such person living in Thakurdwara Village Development Committee (where the Bardia National Park headquarters is located and where I lived during the course of my ethnographic research with Bardia officials) would constantly refer to Shiv Raj Bhatta as the 'king of Bardia National Park' meaning that his authority within the domain of the parks was unquestioned and that he was accorded proper respect by community members and fellow NGO workers.

Not all officials had this unquestioned loyalty to monarchs, nor were their visits to the parks necessarily cast in a positive light. While the real motives of the royals is impossible to ascertain, there are officials of all ranks who are ambivalent at best about how to interpret the place of royalty in the management of parks and wildlife:



Its not like we [the wildlife bureaucrats] were the only ones who were the king's men. Their [royal family's] main interest was to keep the regime going. They sacrificed the wildlife concerns for the regime's concerns. We were not even between 1-5 per cent important in their larger scheme of things.

Another account was an outright denunciation of the king's *savari* by a retired forester known for his intellectual and political (non-royalist) bent. This officer remembered his early days as district forest officer (DFO) during the 1970s in central Nepal, at a time when King Birendra was due to arrive:

We used to get funny, funny directives from the king that were random, haphazard. The king's directives were seen as being above cabinet-level decisions. The king had arrived there [to the site where this DFO was posted]. He had been roaming all over in his helicopter. *Malai dikka lagthiyo savari bhanepache* [I always felt *dikka* (annoyed/sad) whenever there was a royal visit].

#### POST-ANDOLAN: ROYALTY RETURNS TO GAME PARKS

After 1990 royal visits to Protected Areas came to an abrupt halt. For wildlife officials whose careers were shaped by the monarchy, and whose identity was tied to the prominence of the king, a multi-party system of governance meant that previously accepted norms and allegiances had to be shifted in order to survive in the new system.

As all officials scrambled to hedge their bets with political parties and individual politicians (the Congress was favoured by many of the upper-caste officials), royalty took a backseat for the time being. By the end of the decade (2000), Nepalis had become disenchanted with *bahudal* (multi-party democracy) and especially with corrupt politicians. In this climate (when my doctoral research began), the prominence of royalty rose again. When the popularity of the royal family took a nosedive in 1990 and thereafter, they seldom appeared in public and neither did the public seek them. But by the end of the decade, their prominence rose and, once again, they began returning to the game parks. As the acting warden of Bardia remarked:

Royalty have started coming back to parks. Before, there was a period of scolding royalty: they didn't have much support from the public so they shied away from the public. They are re-entering the public now. They had a big contribution in national park management, big hand in policy, and extension of parks, ensuring checks and balance with the army.<sup>32</sup>

Game scouts hoped that the return to the parks in 2000 meant that things would revert to an older, better time. This young game scout had this to say about King Birendra's visit to Bardia in 2000:

I was happy when the *raja* came to Bardia. [He] had a big part in making the national parks. He has direct involvement so I was happy that he came. Maybe it'll be like the *panchayat* times when the *raja* went around the country and the country's conditions improved.

But the heyday of playing *shikar*, of political intrigue in the forests, of leisurely jungle respite, is forever gone. Changes in conservation ethics and, more to the point, the end of the *panchayat* regime has ensured that. In 2000 Crown Prince Dipendra and his brother Prince Neerajan visited Bardia. Far from the splendid pre-*andolan* days, this duo was practically travelling incognito and arrived unannounced:<sup>33</sup> According to the acting warden of Bardia:

I didn't recognise them. Dipendra had a beard and his hair was in a ponytail. I was just told that these were members of the royal family but I did not know whom exactly. I showed them around, I showed them where the crocodile farms were. It took me a while to figure out that this was our crown prince and his younger brother.

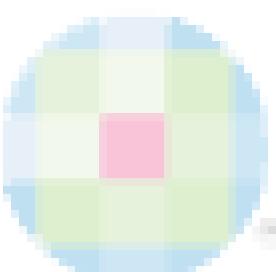
In the aftermath of the *andolan*, politicians ruled. It was a complete inversion of power relations that existed prior to the revolution. Politicians basked in this new-found glory (they had unprecedented levels of public support to begin with). Some became inclined to extend gestures to members of the royal family. A warden from the national park services said:

One minister went to Prince Gyanendra and said he would organise a field visit for him [the prince] to the parks. This minister said to the prince '*na helicopter ko bandbasta gar dinhu*' [I will arrange for a helicopter for you]. The minister was probably thinking '*bichara palace ko manche lai bahudal aye pachi helicopter chadha pauaina*' [poor palace people probably do not get a chance to ride in helicopters after democracy]. *Raja haru ko lagi helicopter chadha ke thulo kura ho ra* [what's the big deal for palace folks to fly helicopters]?<sup>34</sup>

For this warden, a diminished royalty became equated with a diminished self. He narrated this incident in a way to let me know that Nepali politicians were *bekuf* (stupid), unable to come to accurate assessments of a situation and were arrogant. He drew comfort in thinking that politicians were inaccurate in assessing the power base of the royals.

#### CONCLUSION

The identity of game scouts, rangers and park wardens has to be located in the context of their historical ties with the monarchy.<sup>35</sup> The pre-*andolan* (1951–90) accounts show how individual and collective identities were shaped through encounters with royalty, which informed the everyday practices of such park staff.<sup>36</sup>



For this group, the identification of the king as a Hindu monarch (for many, an *avatar* of the god Vishnu) also has central importance. The social relations, professional goals and familial desires envisioned by government servants were linked to their perceived closeness with monarchy and through specific events such as royal hunts. Historically, park staff has displayed particularly strong regard and allegiances for the royal family since Nepali kings sanctioned much of Nepal's early conservation efforts and because monarchs espoused close ties with these officials in the setting up of national parks.

#### *Creating Subjects through the Hunt*

The co-implication of monarchy to bureaucratic identity is clear from narratives of the pre-*andolan* *shikar savaris* or royal hunts. Unlike visits by senior officials and political leaders to the parks today, narratives of park officials regarding royal visits to Protected Areas enable us to see how officials construct mythic narratives that shed light on historical nationalism, and provide a commentary on contemporary political meta-narratives. If royal hunts suggested power, pomp and splendour, then the cessation of royal visits to parks in post-1990 Nepal not only serves as a reminder to government officials of their stripped glory, but also as a calibration of the moral condition of Nepali society.

Appropriating the king as a 'sign' in bureaucratic ideology appeared one of the ways in which park staff gathered the moral strength and agency to put up with daily inequities in a dignified manner. Knowing that the king would visit on regular intervals and that the park staff would have a direct line to him was deeply empowering. At various points during fieldwork, these *savaris* were described as a 'moral boost'. Now, these very officers say their 'voice' has been suppressed with the arrival of democracy. Government servants, especially officials with the wildlife department, felt they had greater 'voice' under the monarchy. Though monarchy-civil servant relations were highly paternalistic, they did provide an intelligible category through which officials understood their societal place.

But once the *shikar savaris* ceased in 1990, the park staff felt ill-equipped to negotiate a hostile environment in which neither newly elected political leaders nor the international aid world was their friend. A broader governmental malaise seems to have taken over. Bureaucrats lost their 'moral boost', and remote postings were seen as 'not charming' any more. With the massacre of the royal family in June 2001, the moral compass provided by the royals, whether real or imagined, was felt to be lost as well.

#### Notes

1. This line of reasoning draws on Mahesh Rangarajan's extensive work on India's wildlife history.
2. Many former Indian princes turned from avid hunters to staunch conservationists. M.K. Ranjitsinh, for example, turned his passion for the hunt into writing on behalf of wildlife protection

in India (Ranjitsinh 1982). This idea of viewing the role of royalty vis-à-vis wildlife in mutually conflicting ways draws its line of reasoning from Rangarajan (1998, 2001).

3 Extensive scholarship examines how national parks and forests as exclusionary spaces work to the detriment of local communities living adjacent to these areas. For the Nepal context see Milton and Birney (1980), Mishra (1982), Thomas-Slayter and Bhatt (1994), Bhatt et al. (1997), Heinen and Kattel (1992). In the Indian context there has been ample debate by scholars such as Kothari et al. (1989, 1995) and Guha (1990). These scholars are interested in issues of indigenous knowledge, participation and state-local alliances. As increasing attention is paid to wildlife management, locals living in the buffer areas of park must additionally contend with marauding elephants, fear of tigers and rhinos, and various other threats to themselves, their livestock and agricultural produce (Greenough 2001). In this article I do not discuss local perceptions of the hunt, their feelings regarding royal park visits, nor their impressions of national park staff towards which the relationship is highly contentious. These serious conflicts on the relationship between NGOs, parks and local people would entail a separate article and has been written about fairly extensively. For examples, see Brosius (1997, 1999), Bryant (1992), Neumann (1992), Peluso (1992) and Messerschmidt (1994).

4 For excellent accounts on the rituals of kingship in traditional societies, see Cannadine and Price (1987), van den Hoek (1990) and Inden (1978).

5 The 1990 people's revolution, popularly known as the *andolan*, brought about transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democratic government. Henceforth, post-*andolan* or simply the *andolan* refers to the period after 1990.

6 At times scholars refer to this period as between 1962 and 1990.

7 Mahendra was the present king's father. In 1964 King Mahendra gave the general designation of Mahendra Kunj to an area that in 1972 was officially declared a Protected Area. This area later became the Royal Chitwan National Park (personal communication with Shiv Raj Bhatta, former acting warden of Royal Bardia National Park, 21 September 2002).

8 A *savari* in this context refers to a royal visit, most often relating to the king. However, the word *savari* is the polite way of referring to 'arrival' and it can be used for non-royals as well. In the context of discussions by national park staff, it always denotes the arrival of the king. *Shikar* *savari* refers to a royal hunt. *Shikar* by itself means to hunt without denoting the involvement of royalty, but in this study it denotes the involvement of royalty.

9 There are many extensive and excellent early accounts of *shikar* in India from which it is useful to extrapolate for the Nepal case, especially in connection with Nepali royalty. See the many accounts by Salim Ali (1927) and R.W. Burton (1952, 1955).

10 The hunt as a rite of passage has been discussed in the South African context by Beinart and Coates (1995).

11 Former director-general of the Department of National Parks who subsequently joined an international development organisation based in Washington DC (interview, February 2001).

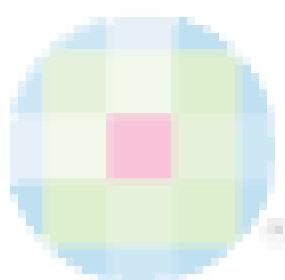
12 This refers to the area in the plains as opposed to the hills.

13 During my childhood in Kathmandu, family members and neighbours looked forward to state visits by foreign dignitaries since it meant that the Kathmandu municipality ensured that stray dogs and rotting garbage disappeared overnight.

14 These white sheets apparently distress or confuse tigers, and it becomes easier to shepherd them to an enclosed area (interview with Royal Bardia National Park game scouts, September 2000).

15 Gregson also reports that Mahendra enjoyed the hunt during the course of his overseas travels. When on a visit to the United States, he bagged a mountain lion. In Scotland he stalked red deer and in Germany wild boar. He collected trophies in East Africa including lions, leopards, rhinoceros and species of giraffe.

16 The Nepalese calendar is fifty-seven years ahead of the Gregorian calendar. Thus *Bikram samvat* 2020 refers to A.D. 1963.



17 Nepal's eight national parks are Chitwan, Bardia, Sagarmatha, Langtang, Rara, Shey Phoksundo, Kaptad, and Makalu-Barun. The four reserves are Royal Suklaphanta, Parsa, Koshi Tappu and Dhorpatan. Kanchanjunga is a conservation area (DNPWC 2001).

18 In 1960 King Mahendra dismissed the elected government and in 1962 promulgated a new constitution in which the king ruled but was advised by a *panchayat* (national assembly), which was partly appointed and partly elected. The crucial feature of this system was its ban on political parties, on the grounds that such political expressions reflected private interests that were 'alien to the traditional political culture of Nepal'. Thus, it is only after the 1990 movement for the restoration of democracy that Nepal has a truer form of democratic governance. See Fuller and Spencer (1996: 21).

19 A 1988 directive from King Birendra gives all park staff (regardless of rank) equal supplies of ration and stipend when they are based in the Protected Areas. Till today this act endears Birendra to national park staff. The purpose was to bring park staff on somewhat parallel terms with provisions given to the army. While the terms are similar, some differences in scale and items are that the army, when posted to remote areas, is given additional supplies of meat, milk and flour among other things (personal communication with Shiv Raj Bhatta, 21 September 2002).

20 Both Kings Mahendra (reign 1955–72) and his son Birendra (1972–2001) undertook annual regional tours of the remote districts of Nepal. The purpose of these trips was to review, reacquaint and learn about local perceptions of governance at the community level.

21 King of Nepal since June 2001 to the present (after the decimation of much of the royal house by Crown Prince Dipendra).

22 A recognised and accepted form of obsequious behaviour, gestures and acts that are performed systematically with the intention to please superiors.

23 That official ideologies are implicated in the construction of royal hunts as memorable (to a lesser extent otherwise) is evident. A very useful discussion on the construction of narratives and counter-narratives by the state in the context of Indian forest management can be found in Sivaramakrishnan (1995: 4): 'Hegemony is not self-securing. It is constructed, maintained, and modified by human agents and state agencies through contest and cooperation on sites like India's forest lands.' See also Sivaramakrishnan (1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b).

24 Khadka Bahadur Khadka Premi, former accountant, Ministry of Forestry.

25 Personal communication with Hemanta Mishra, former director-general, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (of Nepal).

26 For early history of national parks in Nepal, see report by former director-general of national parks, Hemanta Mishra (1974). Also see Mishra and Jeffries (1991).

27 Studies that report on the efficacy of development programmes and strategies are more extensively available for the Department of Forests (as compared to the literature available on park and wildlife management in Nepal). The literature on community forestry (implemented in partnership with the Australian government) for which Nepal is well known is especially extensive.

28 For details on Nepal's bureaucratic history, see Panday (1989, 1999).

29 At least two officers, Ram Prit Yadav and Krishna Man Shrestha (both retired), spent all but two years of their thirty-year careers based in the field, away from urban areas (personal communication with Shiv Raj Bhatta, 21 September 2002).

30 For a detailed report on the development of a comprehensive Protected Areas management plan, see the Woodlands Mountain Institute report of 1990 for the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area Project, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, Ministry of Forestry, Nepal.

31 B.N. Upadhyay, former director-general of the National Park Service.

32 Shiv Raj Bhatta, assistant warden, Royal Bardia National Park, July 2000.

33 Crown Prince Dipendra assassinated his family and then killed himself in June 2001.

34 Shiv Raj Bhatta, 5 June 2000, Royal Bardia National Park.

35. I would argue that His Majesty's government is synonymous with the Royal Family, especially before multi-party democracy was established in 1991.

36. A brief political chronology of Nepal is as follows. The Shah dynasty (forefathers of the present king) ruled from 1769 to 1846 when the Kot massacre brought the Rana family to power. In 1857 Jang Bahadur Rana formalised an arrangement whereby the king acted as head of state and the Rana chief ministers held all powers of state. Collateral succession to the prime ministership was instituted and the Ranas remained in power till the 1950-51 revolution. From 1951 to 1990 the present Shah kings regained power, but from 1962 to 1990 King Mahendra banned all political parties and ruled under a system of *panchayat* democracy. The 1990 *andolan* resulted in multi-party politics in Nepal and since that point onwards the Shah rulers are serving as constitutional monarchs. Technically, the party-less system of governance (with king in absolute power) was from 1962 to 1990, but I refer to the collective period of Shah rule from 1951 to 1990 as the pre-*andolan* period since 1951 to 1962 was arguably not a period of democracy (see Hoftun et al. 1999).

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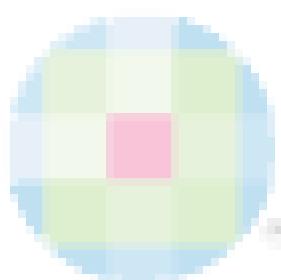
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