

# Wildlife Times



Tigers, one of the largest living cats, are found in great range in size between sub-species in most of the continents of the world. It is considered as an indicator for a healthy ecosystem as it stands on the apex of the food web.

The tigers have existed on the Asian sub-continent since prehistoric times. Of the eight tiger subspecies found in the world, the Royal Bengal Tiger (*panthera tigris tigris*) is found on the Indian Sub-continent - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal.

## Tigers in Nepal

According to historians, tigers were found all along the forests of lowland Nepal until the 1950s. Although some have spotted tiger in Bhutan in as high hills as above 4000 metres, they are not documented for elevations higher than 1500m, that is along the Churia hills. Experts believe that the absence of tiger in Nepali highlands could be result of the loss and fragmentation of its habitat, high human density and depletion of natural prey base.

# TALK ABOUT TIGER

As a result of this, the tiger distribution in Nepal is more or less restricted to the protected areas, and occasionally in the surrounding forests.

They prey upon a wide variety of prey animals in Nepal, including sambar deer, swamp deer, spotted deer, hog deer, barking deer, wild pigs and some other species. Domestic livestock are also preyed upon if they are found in the tiger habitat. Naturally, tigers eventually disappear from areas where natural prey is depleted, even though livestock is available as an alternative prey. Researchers have found that a normal tiger always avoids contact with human beings. However, possibility of a tiger turning into a man-eater cannot be ruled out. A disturbance in natural predator-prey balance, due to human interference, being pushed into marginal habitat and dispersing individuals are stated as some causes.

Following the historic peace process, the Maoists have today become an integral part of the interim government. After 10 years of armed revolution, they have agreed to participate in the process of nation building through democratic political mainstreaming. We specially congratulate the CPN-Maoist for taking the responsibility of the Ministry of Forestry and Soil Conservation.

The Maoists have been, to a great extent, responsible for causing deforestation, displacement of customs offices and security posts, escalating wildlife trade and eventually loss of many wildlife species in one decade. It is natural that armed-conflicts do influence nature conservation in many ways. We had to bear the loss for a greater political cause. Though the loss was irreplaceable, this is the time to concentrate on conservation of the existing biodiversity and wishing that Nepal may not have to witness another conflict and blood-bath.

After success culmination of the conflict, this is the time for the conservationists to see how the conflict and conservation will go together in the future. The past governments had been partially failure to accelerate the conservation works, to minimize poaching and trafficking of wildlife and to punish the poachers and traders. Now, the time has come to see how this new government is going to react on the general complain of the conservationists that the political parties lack commitment towards conservation. When we have seen that the Maoists cadres still were a threat in local levels despite the commitment of following the comprehensive peace accord, the Ministry of Forestry and Soil Conservation is going to face a challenge on how the cadres are going to react on conservation of forest and wild animals in the future. Thus we would like to cautiously welcome the new government and the role of the Maoist ministers in the path to wildlife conservation.

Besides, the confiscation of 254 rare wild birds, being smuggled from Pakistan to Nepal, raised a new wave in the wildlife conservation recently. When we were trying to believe that trade of wild birds have been down these days, this open import of wild birds in mass scale, without following the minimum of the procedure of CITES in the broad daylight has proved that the time to be satisfied with the bureaucracy is still far away. When the conservationists tried to raise their fingers over the import, the birds were dramatically killed and buried in haste, in the midnight, without even proper documentation and inquiry. We don't know, if the birds were infected with Bird Flu, if they were imported with government's approval, if the customs office passed them after production of necessary documents and if all the birds were really buried or only some among them. The escape of the birds' owner from the airport without clearing his possession is still a mystery. The answers of many other questions will be found only after a top-level investigation of the incident is conducted. Otherwise, the government will be blamed for protecting the smuggler and sabotaging the anti-trade efforts - what we do not want.

The International tiger symposium, to be held in Kathmandu from April 16 to 19 has brought a new hope that conservation of tiger will make a new beginning from Nepal, one of some selected habitat of tigers.

**editorial**

**Tiger Habitat**

Tigers are naturally solitary animals. They love to live alone except for mating and other purposes. And when the tiger habitats are rapidly encroached by the human beings in the Terai, it is obvious that the tigers are seeking places where they can live freely. And when it becomes impossible, they naturally tend to enter into human settlement and prey on domestic livestock. And, this in turn, puts the tiger in direct conflict with the local people.

For example, the population of Chitwan district increased from 42,800 in 1954 to 1,94,000 in 1971 and dramatically altered the forest cover and Between 1961 and 1977, 65 percent of forests in Chitwan were destroyed amid the land was converted into cultivation. Encroachment in natural habitat for tigers like this has caused long-term impact in overall wildlife conservation efforts of Nepal.

**Tiger in religion**

Tiger has deep-roots in Nepali religion and culture. The most adored goddess of the Hindus, Durga, rides on tiger and is seen as the most graceful deity due to her "vehicle". A Buddhist legend states that Bodhisatwa, the Buddha in

his earlier lives, once saw a hungry mother tiger and the Bodhisatwa prince preferred to give his flesh away to feed the tigress. This shows the importance of letting a wild animal live in the jungle in the form of compassion.

Apart from this, a Bagh Bhairav Temple is dedicated to Bhairabh in Kirtipur. A legend says that some children were playing with a clay model of a tiger and it suddenly turned into a live tiger. Thus people adored it as a manifestation of Bhairbh. The temple of Bagh Bhairab was constructed by 1126 AD.

**Poaching**

Since 1990, reports from across the tigers' range indicate that there has been a sudden, drastic, Asia-wide increase in tiger poaching - as many as 25 percent to the Russian tigers have been poached since 1992, according to international reports.

In the early 1900s, it became evident that medicinal trade in tiger gone threatened to drive the already endangered tiger to extinction in the wild.

For poachers, nearly ever part of a tiger is valuable. Apart from selling of live tigers as exotic pets - people buy every thing from a dead tiger - bone, skin, teeth, claws, penis and all. A full-size tiger skin is sold in the illegal market at the rate of US \$ 50,000 and a kg of tiger bone costs US \$ 150 to

370. China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, US and UK are said to be the destination countries of the illegal market. It is believed that at least one tiger is killed daily for its use in traditional Chinese medicine.

So much so, a known conservationist claimed that if present worldwide rate of poaching continues for three to six more years, many tiger populations might be extinct before the year 2000.

## Nepal's efforts

Nepal's involvement in international forums like Global Tiger Forum and CITES, where conservation of tiger is a major concern, has shown the countries commitment to safeguard the mammals from the clutches of the poachers and smugglers. Still, the efforts have to be strengthened to declare Nepal's tigers safe from possible extinction.

## Major tiger hauls

Two men were arrested at Tinchule of Baudha on November 6, 2006 with a tiger skin. Babu Ram Lamichhane of Makawanpur and Raj Kapur Mahato of Parsa were the ones who were found guilty of tiger skin trade. Two leopard skins were also seized from the duo.

In 2004 July 11, police confiscated three tiger trophies with five-sacks full of tiger bones.

And in April 2005, two tiger skins were confiscated from Tatopani customs office, which is a major trade like to Tibet Autonomous region of China.

In 2006 April 28, two tiger skins were seized from Birgunj. And in 13 May 2006, one tiger skin was seized along with five sacks of tiger bones.

## Tiger symposium

An international tiger symposium is being organised by Global Tiger Forum in Kathmandu to sort out obstacles and to find out better means for conservation of tigers.

The symposium is being held from April 16 to 18. There will be ten sessions all together and dozens of world's known tiger experts.

## Paudel new DG of DNPWC

Dr Krishna Chanra Paudel has been appointed as the director general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation on March 21, to replace Shyam Bajimaya. And release of two committed field officials at Chitwan National Park, Tikaram Adhikari and Kamal Jung Kunwar, have provided a moral boost for the conservationists at local level, who were victimized of politics and racket of the wildlife traders.

On the other hand, the chief warden of Chitwan National Park, Gopal Upadhyaya, will be back to his office after being suspended for two months over the controversy of release of notorious rhino-horn trader Yakche. It is yet to be seen what major decision he will make in his second tenure but conservationists fear that his coming back, will again create another setback among the field officials.

## Tiger Action plan

# A highlight

A new action plan for conservation of tigers on offing is intending to develop regional strategies for monitoring illegal wildlife trade along the borders with India and China.

One of the five goals of the draft of the Tiger Conservation Action Plan for Nepal (2007-2011) states that the plan will focus on transboundary cooperation - to "enhance transboundary cooperation for combating illegal trade in wildlife, maintaining ecological integrity in the tiger landscapes and promoting tiger tourism".

The action plan is being drafted jointly by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, National Trust for Nature Conservation and WWF Nepal, which is being facilitated by Nepal Nature dot Com. The final draft has been prepared and will be sent to the government for the final draft soon.

According to the draft paper, the authorities in the preserved areas in the two sovereign countries have different working styles and power of attorney; they are not allowed to meet and exchange information without formal approval of the central or federal government bodies.

One of strategies of the action plan states, "Strengthen transboundary cooperation at the central and field levels to complement the efforts of controlling poaching of wildlife and smuggling of wildlife body parts." And it further aims at maintaining ecological integrity of the wildlife habitats focusing on the tigers and the other flagship species that used to cross international borders.

And to maintain ecological integrity, the action plan has also envisages organising interaction meetings with the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) secretariat to explore the possibility of using SAARC as a forum for wildlife conservation, anti-poaching and control of illegal trade in wildlife.

The action plan will also prepare a protocol for joint research activities on the transient wildlife species that frequently cross the international borders.

To meet the strategies, Nepal will prepare guidelines for holding transboundary meeting at the field levels, which will include identification of issues, alternatives solutions, and commitments on the part of Nepal.

This has also planned to review tourism plans from the perspectives of tiger tourism. "Promote tiger tourism that will benefit the local communities and eventually be a conservation strategy for tigers and their prey base," it recommends.

Out of the total budget of US \$ 1,097,000, the action plan has allocated US \$ 119,000 for the transboundary cooperation alone. For this, the action plan will spend US \$ 28,000, 29,000, 21,000, 23,000 and 18,000 for the first, second, third, fourth and fifth year respectively. In addition, US \$ 77,000 is allocated for the protected areas under the same objective.

# Wild Birds confiscated, killed and buried

Central Animal Quarantine Office (CAQO) killed and buried 254 rare species of wild birds on Wednesday midnight at the premises of Tribhuvan International Airport, smuggled from Pakistan, in the name of keeping possibility of Avian Influenza at bay.

The illegal imports of the rare birds were passed by the customs office when they were caught by the District Forest Officers in the airport, while the owner of the birds escaped the scene.

"We had to do it. We destroyed them as the government had prohibited import of any living or dead birds from Pakistan in fear of bird flu," said the chief veterinarian at CAQO Dr Balaram Thapa today, adding that destroying took place after long discussion and verbal agreement among the concerted government officials.

The variety of birds, mainly belonging to parrot families and believed to be of African origin, were brought to Kathmandu in Pakistan International Airlines flight no. PK 268 in four cages with tag nos. 0124PK39-58-42, 0124PK39-58-43, 0124PK39-58-44 and 0124PK39-58-45 as possession of Ahmed Shaikh Wahee at 3.00 pm Wednesday.

According to Animal Health and Animal Service Act 2055, one needs to acquire government approval before importing live animals from foreign countries and he must produce International Animal Health Certificate from the country of origin, which makes the country of origin responsible in the case of any epidemic outbreak. "The birds were imported without any such documents," said Thapa.

In addition, according to National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 2029, the importer should bring CITES (Convention of International Trade of Endangered Species) certificates from the country of origin when importing such endangered wild animals.

Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) had written to the chief of Customs Office at TIA, asking to provide the illegal birds so that it could make procedure but it could not get the birds.

The planning officer at DNPWC Tikaram Adhikari said that the birds should have been sent to the importer's country immediately according to CITES agreement. "We also know the danger of bird flu but we should have been given authority to identify the birds and the birds should go through formal quarantine," he said.

He added that the birds could worth tens of millions of rupees and the smugglers wanted to export them to other countries.

On the other hand, the District Forest Officer Madhav Acharya raised objection of destroying the birds in haste, staying there in the night till 2.00 in the morning.

"The customs officer did not help us arrest the importer when we arrived there. It is suspicious that the birds were destroyed waking up all the night and without our presence," he said, adding that the incident ruined possibility of breaking the nexus of bird smugglers.

Meanwhile, conservationists and experts of birds today condemned killing of rare birds in haste, suspecting involvement of smugglers in the incident.

Central Animal Quarantine Office (CAQO) killed and



buried over 250 wild birds, illegally imported from Pakistan on Wednesday midnight to prevent the country from bird flu.

"It was indeed a great loss. I could not see the species but I can say that those birds are fine gifts of nature and we should learn to love them," said RK Shrestha, the director of Central Zoo, while talking with The Himalayan Times.

When the birds have come, it is the responsibility of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and the expert there should be given access to possess them, to examine them and decide about them.

"I talked the officials from DNPWC and agreed to give a special space for the birds in the zoo so that the birds could be observed for certain period of time to see if they are really infected," he said, adding that he was disappointed to know about disposing of such a treasure without thorough discussion.

Rajendra Narasingh Suwal, a bird expert and managing director of Nepal Nature Dot Com, said that the nobody should promote illegal import of birds but what happened on Thursday night made us think about lots of things.

He demanded that Commission of Investigation of Abuse of Authority should take steps in the incident is seen the responsible authority failed to do its duty but promoted the smuggler by letting it escape.

The chairman of Wildlife Watch Group has also demanded that there should be a high-level investigation as it was not only the matter of killing of birds but also of saving the racket of smugglers at the cost of the birds.

"We found that the illegally imported birds were released by the customs office and let the importer flee from the airport's tight security. But the poor birds had to lose their lives," he said.

And issuing an appeal by seven conservation organizations have raised objection over killing of the birds without letting the experts examine and identify the species.

