

MONGOOSE TRADE IN NEPAL

by Prasanna Yonzon

Introduction



The mongoose lives in a diverse habitat which ranges from forest to open woodland, savannah, semi-desert to desert. It belongs to the Order Carnivora, Family Herpestidae and there are 35 species, 2 sub-families and 17 genera. A few are arboreal and semi-aquatic. Mongooses are close evolutionary relatives to the civet and genet family of Viverridae (MacDonald, 2001).

Mongooses have strong family bonds and a well developed hierarchical system. They are agile and resilient carnivores. In appearance, the mongoose has a long pointed face with small rounded ears and a tubular

body with short legs and a tapering bushy tail. The coat color varies from species to species, e.g. dark grey, brown, yellowish, reddish brown.

The life span is 7-12 years, but the animal can live up to 19 in captivity (Hinton and Dunn, 1967). The average gestation period is 60 days, but for the small Indian mongoose and narrow striped mongoose it is 42 days and 105 days respectively.

The diet consists of insects and other invertebrates, small vertebrates, birds' eggs, crabs, fish and occasionally fruit and other vegetable matter. The mongoose's quick reflexes also enable it to eat snakes and scorpions as well.

Distribution

The mongoose is found from western Africa to Madagascar, southwest Europe, from the Near East to India and Sri Lanka to south China, Southeast Asia to Borneo and the Philippines. The small Indian mongoose was introduced to the West Indies and the Hawaiian islands in the late 1800s to control rats in sugarcane plantations. Mongooses are prolific breeders and thus are widely spread (MacDonald, 2001).

There are 7 species of mongoose found in Asia, i.e. Indian grey mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*), Indian brown mongoose (*H. fuscus*), Crab-eating mongoose (*H. urva*), Small Indian mongoose (*H. javanicus*), Short-tailed mongoose (*H. brachyurus*), Ruddy mongoose (*H. smithii*), and Striped-necked mongoose (*H. vitticollis*). Three species are found in Nepal, i.e. Indian grey mongoose, Indian brown mongoose and Crab-eating mongoose (Chapagain & Dhakal, 2001).

Mongooses tend to live near human settlements, where they more or less depend on human trash. In Nepal, it is an edge dwelling species, surviving on rodents, small insects and other small vertebrates.

Cultural status

The mongoose is considered to be the farmer's friend because it preys on rodents and other insects that destroy crops. The enmity between mongooses and snakes is legendary in myth and in reality. Rudyard Kipling, in his story of the loyal mongoose Rikki Tikki Tavi from his *Jungle Book* series, immortalized the mongoose as one that could dare a cobra. Similarly, Nepalese folklore is replete with stories where the mongoose is portrayed as a friend of people.

Utility

Previously, mongooses were traded live and brought in to prevent field rats, insects and snakes from destroying crops (Israel and Sinclair, 1987). Today, however, it is killed and traded for its hair. The hair is used in making paintbrushes which are pliant and soft. These paintbrushes are favored by both students and artists. Each animal yields about 10 g of hair (Source: documentary on Mongoose Trade in India: A brush -with death - a Wildlife Trust of India undertaking). Quality-wise, mongoose hair is considered to be a little inferior to sable, but much better than bristles of badger, pig and squirrel hair. The tip of the hair of mongoose tapers to a fine point like sable does, making it more preferred. Softer than hog bristle but stiffer than ox hair, mongoose hair makes versatile, durable brushes for oil, tempera, and acrylic painting. Mongoose hair brushes can be identified by a circular dark brown tip, cream colored center, and dark roots. The darker tip distinguishes it from badger hair, which has a white marking on the tip (MacDonald, 2001).

The mongoose is also exploited by street performers in India and Nepal who use them to stage bloody fights with snakes. Illegal trading in mongoose hair boomed in India because the mongoose was not protected by any wildlife laws.

Protection level

In Nepal, the mongoose is not included in the protected list of mammals, as they are distributed everywhere (BPP, 1995) except in the high mountain region. Farmers like them for their ability to control field rats, although sometimes they upset the farmers by burrowing in the fields.

Mongoose status and trade in Nepal

In Nepal, not as many mongooses are killed as in India, but it is evident that Nepal produces paintbrushes with mongoose hair. Since the total ban on the mongoose hair trade was introduced in India, it is probable that Nepal will meet the demand. The illicit trade in mongoose in Nepal has yet to be researched.

A survey conducted by Wildlife Conservation Nepal (WCN) in urban settings of Kathmandu found stationery shops that sold mongoose paintbrushes. Today, three factories operate in Kathmandu that deal with mongoose hair.

Previously, Indian companies supplied mongoose brushes to Nepal, but since the mongoose was put in Schedule II of the Indian Wildlife Act, the trade was restricted and local establishments have opened in Kathmandu to make mongoose paintbrushes. This means that either the illegal import of mongoose hair from India still exists or mongoose is being hunted in Nepal. The trade seems to be thriving in Kathmandu.

Controlling trade

Actions that can be done to control the trade in mongoose:

1. An awareness campaign could be launched by the College of Fine Arts, Lalit Campus, to lobby that schools and institutions should not use brushes made of mongoose hair. With the support of line agencies such as the Department of National Parks, Department of Forests and WCN, circulars can be sent to schools asking them not to use paint brushes made from mongoose hair. This could have a big impact on the market. Awareness classes on mongoose could also be conducted on television and through other media.
2. The protected list of mammals of Nepal must be updated, as it has not been amended during the last 30 years. The mongoose must be kept in the Schedule I list so that it is not hunted any more and given total protection by the Nepalese government.

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