

## PLUGGING POACHER'S HEAVEN

**Prasanna Yonzon**

The global trade in wild animals and plants legal and illegal is worth billions of dollars which includes hundreds of millions of plant and animal specimens, and a large variety of products derived from them. Trafficking of wildlife and its body part is the second largest illicit trade beside narcotics. South Asia is a fertile ground for trafficking of wildlife products, as there is limited monitoring and people are not aware of the implication of the trade. Therefore, illegal trafficking of wildlife could do an irreversible damage to Nepal's natural heritage. Nepal has an open border with India on the south and the Autonomous Region of Tibet, China on the north, which has been the gateway for such thriving illegal activities.



Tiger skin seized in Boudha



109 Leopard skin seizure in Swayambhu, 2003.

South Asia (India and Nepal) holds the largest population of the Asian one horned Indian rhinoceros and more than half the total population of Royal Bengal tiger which is under constant threat from poaching. The wildlife has had all time high poaching from 2001 onwards. During the fiscal year 2002-2003, rhino's mortality rose to 58 individuals - a little over 9% of the total population (612), which meant rhinos were being lost more than they were being born (growth rate 3.2% annual). Of these, 38 fell to poachers while 20 died natural death. If such trend persists, a catastrophic effect is in the offing whereby we could lose the charismatic endangered one horned rhino. Since last April till date, Nepal lost 20 rhinos in Chitwan alone of which 12 were poached.



Beetles smuggled in cotton balls

Of the non-charismatic species in 2001 alone, 194 specimen representing 4 species of stag beetles were confiscated from two Japanese national while they were boarding a plane from Kathmandu. This did not deter another set of 'wildlife entrepreneurs' from collecting over 200 specimens of 6 species in 2002, which were also confiscated. A pair of stag beetle fetches a little over Nepali Rs. 150,000 in Japan. To capitalize on

the illicit invertebrate trade, in the name of research, identification and scientific publications Nepal's invertebrate are being exported. In 2003, the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area personnel seized 1,139 arthropod specimen representing 243 species from a German group, which now claims that the purpose of collection was for scientific reasons only.

Recently in Tibet, a consignment with a price tag of around US\$ 800,000 was seized which contained 32 tiger pelts, 579 leopard skins and 665 otter pelts. These were transported in trucks from Nepal. Some other notorious seizures in 2003 were the 109-leopard skin near Swaymbhu Temple; 215 kg of shahtoosh wool (it is estimated that at least 3,000 Chiru -Tibetan Antelope must have been killed) in Dharchula, India indicates Nepal as a major conduit with thriving market. This worries all nations including Nepal that are state party to Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES).

A few more examples. Last year, a Nepali man disembarking in Narita airport, Tokyo was caught with 7 rhino horns. About four years back, an eminent Bhutan lady with diplomatic immunity was found with 8 rhino horn in Taiwan. With such high intricacies of individual involvement, illegal wildlife trade seems to be increasing amongst influential elites and no institution seems to take the lead to investigate. Given these, we need to be more proactive and responsible as all these illegal wildlife products pass through the scrutiny of many line agencies situated at international airport and at custom centers in border areas. To contemplate seriously on addressing these problems, line agencies including stakeholders need to be more vigilant.

Despite the strong legislation on wildlife conservation the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 clearly states that any animal listed in the protected schedule (27 mammals, 3 reptiles and 9 birds) hurt or injured shall be taken as a crime against the state and the delinquent is liable to penitentiary, fine or both. Such should deter poachers from poaching activities, but instead poaching occurs in most protected areas because of rewards outweigh punishment.

Last August, Wildlife Conservation Nepal, which was established with the objectives to monitor and curb illegal wildlife trade in rural and urban areas of Nepal took the lead with the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation to bring over 30 stakeholders to a two day deliberation on developing strategy to curb poaching in protected areas. The program was supported by Care for the Wild International and The Rufford Laing Foundation, both UK based charity organizations. In this deliberation, all officers and rangers of the Department were provided with warm gears by Care for the Wild International to monitor the highly elusive snow leopard movement in extreme cold climate. The concept of such deliberation was to draw out a policy in mitigating poaching. To strengthen this deliberation, the Department had developed an anti poaching strategy for Royal Chitwan National Park, which is currently being implemented.

Today, the process of broadening stewardship and stakeholders towards limiting poaching beyond protected areas may perhaps require able and reputable organizations. In this regard, Wildlife Conservation Nepal has initiated networks with different line agencies and stakeholders of which one of them is the Nepal Ex-Police Association, which have a very extensive network in Nepal. In Chitwan alone, there are more than 5,000 members, which could be used as a tool to combat poaching outside the protected areas by informing the community that these ex-policemen have

been pressed into service once again for the conservation of wildlife. This would be a good deterrence to poachers.

Strict protection measures alone cannot address wildlife conservation and poaching. It requires the support of the local community. Information sharing to control poaching needs to be developed amongst enforcement agencies and stakeholders, which is hard to come by. Furthermore, we need to understand that poaching is a part of livelihood of certain group who subsist on forest resources. Elsewhere in the world, poachers are put into conservation services and there have been success stories as in the case of Pabitora Wildlife sanctuary in Assam for rhino conservation. We need to distinguish between poachers and wildlife traders. The latter is an ominous threat to our wildlife and to keep our conservation stories intact, perhaps more support are needed from the public sector as well.