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CULTURE IS CONSERVATION

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Background

Nature conservation has not been easy because resources are finite and humans are not. Therefore, problems connected with conservation of both renewable and non-renewable resources, are perpetual. To address these problems, our modern thinking have ushered policies, stringent laws and regulations including enhanced mechanism such as human resource development and sustainable development strategy. But, mitigating them has been momentary in the context of large-time frame. Our knowledge on many issues connected with exploitation of both biological and natural resources are limited and therefore, can not be accurately predicted or effectively resolved. Perhaps, their solutions reside in relentless, guardian-like efforts that are always in want. Conversely, many societies through their culture have successfully managed their resources in the past and still can because they have a sheer strength in their culture that brings social cohesion.

This paper describes how mountain communities in Nepal are shaped by culture to benefit humans and to sustain existence of wildlife resources. My experience in the villages of Dolphu and Wangri of Mugu District, Khangsar of Manang District and the uppers riches of the Mustang Districts (fig. 1), suggest that the natives have protected wildlife and other natural resources through their cultural heritage and religious sentiments. Therefore, collectively, they have had retained the essence of sustained yield of biological resources, which is comparable to the principles of wildlife management.

The Langu Monks

There are 16 villages including Dolphu and Wangri, in the northeastern high mountains of the Mugu District. As all inhabitants are of Tibetan origin, they share more or less same cultural beliefs and customs shaped by the Tibetan Buddhism. In the Langu Valley, Dolphu and Wangri Villages with some 90 houses shelter more than 600 people. Life is harsh because of growing population and less availability of agricultural land due to steep terrain. Low precipitation and extreme dry conditions result in low agricultural yield that are not enough for

household subsistence even for 6 months. As alternatives are few, villagers survive on the earnings obtained through bartering firstly in Tibet and then, with the mid and lowland villages of far-western Nepal. Having to struggle to survive on the edge with a 6-month food-deficit each year, villagers also hunt wildlife.

Wildlife resources of the Langu Valley are governed and sustained primarily by the *Lama* (Buddhist monks). Culturally, they have an effect on communities through the teachings of Buddhism and regulate: 1) specific hunting areas; 2) hunting season; and 3) limit hunters' population. There are several monasteries (*gompas*), shrines (*chortens*) and caves within and outside villages and in nearby forest areas. These are used for prayers, religious studies and meditation where no hunting and felling of live trees are allowed. Senior *Lama* from *gompas*, continually preach to protect such areas. To achieve such conservation goal, a *Lama* had to convince villagers about the purpose and religious benefits of such plan. Once villagers accept their advice, the *Lama* would offer some money to the village monastery and perform prayers. Any breach in such religious commitment if found, culpable individuals and families, are penalized by the village headmen because such acts are considered social insult. In fact, infringement is non-existence because social-tolerance is little. At least 30% of the forest area belonging to Dolphu and Wangri Village, has been designated as religious protected areas by the *Lama* in the past and present. These areas harbor very healthy populations of wildlife including endangered species like the snow leopard and musk deer.

The history and tradition on hunting of wild animals such as the musk deer, blue sheep, Himalayan tahr, and leopard in the Langu Valley is aboriginal (Jackson, 1979). Six or more hunting parties with as many as 30 men in total, hunt at least 2 - 3 months each year mainly during winter when snowfall is heavy. Hunting for them is as important as agriculture for their survival. Besides the communal hunting, Langu Valley's wildlife is also hunted occasionally. During their communal hunting activities, they can trap or kill 5 - 10 animals (blue sheep or Himalayan tahr) at one time using snares, traps or by

herding animals on the deep snow or by driving them through poisoned bamboo spears. For many, witnessing hunting events in the Langu Valley may appear devastating with assumptions that such happens everywhere and all the time. If this was true or should happen in the future, hunting can decimate the entire wildlife.

More than half of the human population in Langu, constitute women, *Lama* and *Chumma* (subordinate monks) who consider hunting as prohibitory act. Also, any or all the male members from the family of a *Lama* and *Chumma* also do not hunt as such is considered derogatory for the entire family by the society. This has significantly reduced the no. of hunters in these villages. Also, the *Lama* have played the role of custodian to safeguard biodiversity. For example, at the request of the *Lama* and *Chumma*, hunters may relinquish their hunting activities for good. They conduct frequently discourse on hunter's merits and demerits and then suggest some alternatives. As custom goes, the *Lama* or *Chumma* will offer hunters some money and blessings in the presence of villagers. This is how hunting is denounced and no. of hunters are limited. There are several people in the Langu Valley, who lived as hunters once but now they have faithfully renounced their past. Likewise, several men who had been injured either by wild animals or accident while hunting, have become *Lama*.

Also, learned monks like *Rimpoche* or *Tilku* (incarnated *Lama*) contribute very much to conservation. Whenever villagers get their visit, it is customary for villagers to make a promise to give up any ill-practices that are against the teachings of Buddhism. In the Langu Valley, during such congregations, villagers give up either the use of tobacco or any form of hunting. Morally wrong habits are also renounced. Their faith in *Dharma* is remarkable, and promises are hardly broken.

Lama restrict all hunting activities during festivals and auspicious days of the Tibetan calendar. As a taboo as well as to procure more meat, village hunters attempt to kill male individuals more as they are larger than females. It is very much evident that the *Lama* practice the philosophy of active wildlife management which is still in want in today's conservation in Nepal. Traditionally, *Lama* and *Chumma* have freedom to eliminate any predator that kill repeatedly livestock and cause enormous loss to poor households. In fact, eliminating any such pest animal irrespective of its rareness and conservation status, is widely welcomed by all village population. For example, an old *Lama* had planted poisoned bamboo spears in a pitfall trap on the main trail and killed a leopard that had killed many livestock for several months. It is believed that by killing a predator who is habituated to kill livestock for various reasons, many animals are saved because they are not its natural prey. In other words, the *Lama* had not killed a leopard but rescued dozens of animals that benefit mankind.

The Khangsar Native

Khangsar of Manang District is significant in their traditions on conservation when compared with the people of Langu. Khangsar is a large village with more than 1,000 people. Not only hunting of wildlife is prohibited, killing of any livestock is thoroughly forbidden. Natives live exclusively on agriculture, animal husbandry and trade. As all villagers are Buddhist, they rigidly follow the principles of nonviolence. Domestic animals are never slaughtered for consumption of meat. Meat is available only when livestock are killed either by a predator or deaths due to accident. Sentiments run so strong that a great hesitancy appears even to raise a few chickens simply because chickens eat insects and other small creatures.

The nonviolence practices of the Khangsar natives have maintained a viable population of wildlife including the snow leopard, blue sheep and musk deer. Surrounding forests of the Khangsar Village probably harbors most dense population of musk deer in Nepal. In the past and present, Khangsar natives have been the guardian of wildlife. For example, once some poachers from Lamjung, neighboring district, had covertly entered into Khangsar forest with an intention of poaching musk deer. However, they were spotted, chased and captured by the villagers and handed over to the concerned authority.

As the local economy of the Khangsar Village largely depends on animal husbandry, each household keeps a considerable number of yaks, horses, sheep and goats. Since most of the land around the village is used for agriculture, livestock are grazed in the alpine grasslands and sheltered in the temporary cattle shed (*goth*) far away from the village. In the alpine pastures, mortality in livestock is high due to the snow leopard. The economic loss is devastating when snow leopard (body weight: 60 – 70 kg) pulls down adult horses (body weight: 150 kg) which may cost nearly 50,000 Nepali rupees. Livestock-related depredation is compounded further by the Tibetan wolf, jackal and wild dog.

Every year, some Khangsar households suffer big loss in their livestock due to heavy predation. When the loss becomes unmanageable for households because of the depredation by the problem individual predator, active wildlife management is sought. The villagers seek the help of a blacksmith (*Kami*), who is non-Buddhist, to kill the problem predator so that further loss of the livestock could be avoided. Although an occupational caste in Nepal, blacksmiths constitute one of the most knowledgeable forest users. Because they have traditional knowledge to make all farming tools for generations, they are very well aware of forest resources including wildlife, farming, and grazing (Balla et al., 1991). A village blacksmith operates with several indigenous methods of wildlife trapping and killing. Both trapping and killing methods vary depending on the species. Historically, after killing the leopard, the

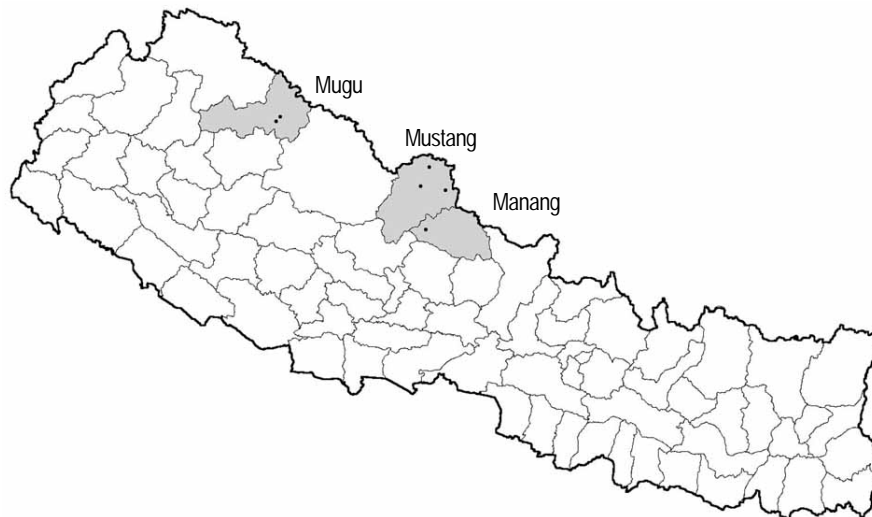


Figure 1. Mugu, Mustang and Manang Districts of Nepal (black dots represent study areas).

blacksmith with the fresh skin, would visit each house in several adjoining villages. In return, villagers would appreciate and offer him money, clothes, edibles and blessings. His reward value would relate to predator type. For example, he would earn more from a snow leopard or forest leopard and little for killing fox, jackal or wild dog. Such display has been abandoned since the recent past but active management is in place. At present, one blacksmith family, who actually had come from Tanahu District is now staying permanently in Khangsar. Besides serving the villagers by manufacturing various farming and building tools, the blacksmith family has also contributed in the mitigation of high livestock depredation at the request of the herders.

Meanwhile, such arrangement facilitates habitat availability for wildlife, primarily for the free-ranging grazers. In Som Dzong of Mustang, villagers do not allow use of sickle and other tools for collecting grass and fuel wood, when they have crops in the fields. They believe that breaking this tradition will bring misfortune not only to those who violate but also to all villagers. The villagers pluck the grass and break the wood by hands during the restricted time. Thus, only a limited amount of grass and fuelwood is collected. This restriction promotes more plants in their growing season and prevents overexploitation of fodder and fuelwood, suggesting restrictions can be used as tools in the management of common property resources.

The Mustang Communities

People of Ghemi, Marang, Tsarang and many other villages of the Mustang District do not allow local as well as outsiders to visit their high altitude pastures except for about 2 - 3 months in late autumn and early winter. Therefore, these restricted pastures are devoid of humans and their livestock for almost 9 months each year. Meanwhile, pastures in other higher areas of the Nepal-Himalaya, are swarmed with livestock in the summer when plant growth is rapid. However, grazing has been so extensive as well intensive, plant yield is poor. Therefore, the Mustang sanctions are rare by themselves. These sanctions have become tradition and communities believe that if they are not followed stringently, natural calamities may occur. It has become such a key issue amongst households, someone breaching these customary practices, has to pay 10,000 Nepali rupees as penalty to the local village committee. Local residents visit these areas in early winter when grasses and medicinal herbs have matured and dry. Thus, the custom not only prevent the advent of so-called natural calamities as the local belief goes, but also maintains alpine grassland from overexploitation of cattle grazing and harvesting of medicinal herbs.

Elsewhere

In a few areas of the Midhills in Nepal, natives who have considerable hunting experience, instruct and guide their group members not to kill animals during breeding season, gravid females and young animals. This notion is comparable to the selective harvest management. Norms of hunting (*shikar*) are always there amongst natives. Therefore, hunting as such is not downbeat to conservation. Many native hunters do not eat meat of female animals (both free-ranging and domestic) because they produce young and nurse them. Also, the Hindus do not sacrifice any female animals as offerings to their deities. As females for any given wild species, have crucial role in population, perhaps the best explanation may have come from its reproductive biology associated with the cultural sentiments of females nursing young. However, culture and tradition in Midhills and Terai, seems to have lesser bearing on conservation. Villages are numerous and scattered far beyond yet they are not isolated as in the high mountains. As a result, many townships and villages have population of Nepalis of different ethnic background and religion. Given these, social cohesion through culture is difficult. Therefore, they may require social capital more than anything else.

Is Culture Picture Perfect ?

As hunting is an inseparable part of a way of life in the Langu Valley, poison spears kill wild animals including females and young. Also, endangered species like the snow leopard and musk deer are poached (Jackson 1979). Given that a trans-border market exists for wildlife products such as musk, leopard bones and pelts between northern frontiers of Nepal and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, rewards from poaching become too lucrative for the natives who are largely marginalized from the mainstream development. Violation of conservation norms is not one - way direction. For example, Langu villagers strongly resisted a hunt by two foreign guests accompanied by a government official in one of their religious areas, several years back. Now, the Langu Valley is an integral part of Shey Phuksundo National Park. Likewise, earlier government officials in Manang, were reported of wildlife poaching for meat using fire arms. Now, Manang has been identified for the snow leopard conservation by the Annapurna Conservation Area.

Mustang is no different. Population viability and habitat requirements of several endangered and protected species that are found in Mustang, are far from adequate. Historically, the residents (*Loba*) of Mustang have had intimate relation with the Tibetan pastoralists since the 15th century (Yonzon, 2001). Their lifestyle included a combination of animal husbandry, peripheral agriculture and trade. The closure of pastures along the Tibetan border with Tibet being annexed into China in 1960s, had a crowding effect of livestock in the upper

pastures of Mustang. Given these, Nepal's last remnant population of the Tibetan wild ass (*Kiang*) (*Equus hemionus kiang*) in Chhujung, have to compete with yaks and horses (Shah et al., 2002). Likewise, the dwindling Tibetan gazelle (*Ghowa*) (*Procapra pictdaudata*) have to vie for food with livestock and many succumb to illegal hunting near the Nepal - China (Tibet) border, for meat and skin. Also, the Tibetan argali (*Ovis ammon hodgsoni*) immediately discontinue using alpine meadows, their preferred habitat at the lower Damodarkund Valley (elevation: 5,000 m) with the arrival of livestock every summer (Shah, 2003). It is important to note that these three species, namely; Tibetan wild ass, Tibetan gazelle, and Tibetan argali are found in Nepal only in Mustang. The above scenario suggests that isolated mountain communities and their culture perhaps cannot cope with any regional upheaval in political landscape and effects of open market economy. Therefore, addressing transfrontier conservation is equally important.

Conservation is considered collaborative when indigenous people are empowered to enjoy rights and responsibilities for managing resources. Participatory land management programs do not weaken land ownership and park management but promote rights to use the productivity of the land in exchange for protection (Yonzon, 1993). When modern conservation policies become inadequate, perhaps culture and religious customs can serve as a compliment to realign conservation strategy. In the Nepal-Himalaya, cultural heritage and tradition can and should muster a greater force for conservation because mountain people have unmovable faith and commitment.

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