

Trophy hunting impacts on Kashmir Markhor and changing the negative perception of local communities about wildlife in Chitral District, Pakistan

The diversity of wild flora and fauna across multiple landscapes is vast and stark variation exists owing to a diverse set of climatic conditions in Pakistan. Mainly, northern flanks of Pakistan are considered biodiversity hotspots as they harbor an array of iconic mammalian species, including Markhor *Capra falconeri*, Blue Sheep *Psuedis nayaur*, Himalayan Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*, Himalayan Ibex *Capra sibirica*, and Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia* (Khan & Baig 2020). This species richness is attributed to the variation in natural habitats ranging from dry temperate forests to alpine and sub-alpine meadows (Baig & Al-Subaiee 2009). Most of these species are pivotal from a conservation perspective as their existence is an indicator of a healthy ecosystem, and this factor enhances manifold when the fragile landscape of this part of the world is under consideration.

Among these iconic taxa, Kashmir Markhor *Capra falconeri cashmeriensis* is one such species of conservation focus as it is threatened for survival and classified as “Near threatened” by IUCN (Michel & Rosen 2016). It is facing many anthropogenic pressures akin to overgrazing leading

to habitat degradation, habitat fragmentation as a result of infrastructure projects coupled with climate change. These factors are proving fatal to the survival of this magnificent species in the longterm. Along with these, one of the significant threats for Markhor was poaching by the local communities.

The government and other NGOs working for the protection and preservation of natural resources are doing their best and have introduced some initiatives aiming to involve locals in conservation and bring up a sense of stewardship for overall wildlife in general and Markhor in particular.

One such activity was the commencing of trophy hunting of Markhor in Chitral District, and then this activity was replicated to other areas and targeted other species like Himalayan Ibex by the Provincial Wildlife Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.



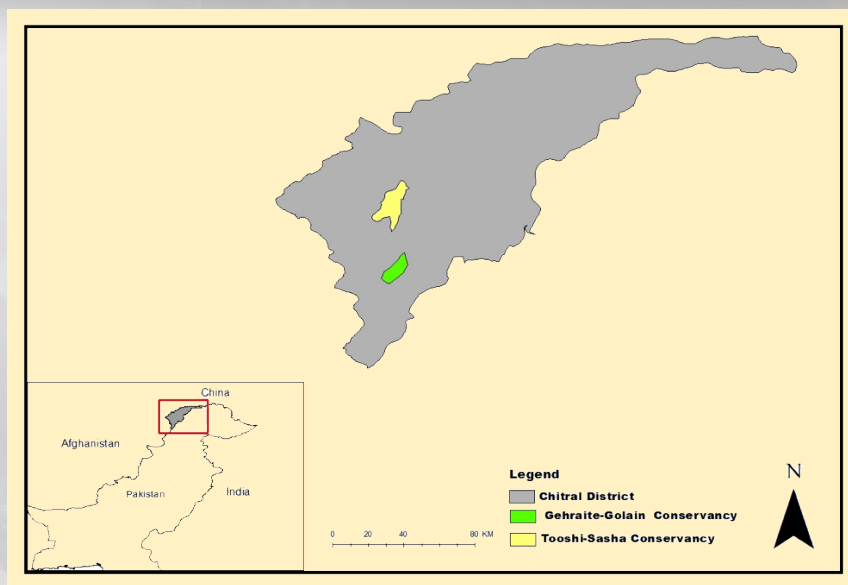
Although this practice was initiated in 1983, yet the local communities were not directly involved. To engage local communities directly in conservation, two community game reserves were established, Tooshi-Sasha and Gehraite-Golain Markhor Conservancies, where trophy hunting was officially authorized in 1998. This scheme was initiated with sole aim of

is given to the community while 20% revenue goes to government (Wildlife Department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 2010). The number of hunting permits are issued based on annual population survey of the species. The recent survey indicates that population is on rise and stands close to 2700 individuals. consequently the trophy hunting quota has been increased up to three in the past decade as a consequence of this scheme. The most pleasant and positive outcome of this effort is the change in the perception of local communities about wildlife in general and Markhor in particular as now people deem them their “own precious asset”.

The amount paid to them is deposited in the Village Conservation Committee (VCC) account from where it is spent on the overall development and infrastructure projects, which have brought a very positive change in their life. We quote few instances here that reflect the success of this initiative. In one village of Tooshi-Sasha Conservancy, a community school has been established from the fund of trophy hunting and the teachers are paid from it. Now the children of that village obtain their primary education from the very school, and this has led to enhancement in literacy ratio, especially among females. Similarly, a bridge has been constructed from the said scheme and surprisingly named as Markhor

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involving the community in conservation efforts of this iconic species and to instill the sense of stewardship in them to become the custodian of overall wildlife (Ali et al. 2015). It is pertinent to note that revenue generated in lieu of permit fee from the hunters, 80% share



Map depicting Markhor trophy hunting conservancies in Chitral District, Northern Pakistan

bridge. Besides these described projects, many more are being carried out. In a nutshell, trophy hunting as a conservation tool has proved a success story here in revival of the overall wildlife, as it is evident from an increase in the numbers of markhor each year in census reports and physical sightings from roadside validate this claim. Furthermore, ecologically this economic incentive has not only benefited Markhor but the entire wildlife, including carnivores has been protected as evident from the filming of Himalayan Lynx for the first time from these conservancies.

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