

REPORT ON EXCHANGE VISIT TO LADAKH
To Learn about Homestays and Monitoring of Snow Leopards

Prepared by:

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I. Training in conducting of wildlife surveys and interpretation of traces

The manager of SLC Rinchen Wangchuk gave overview of transect survey. Selection of transect site was the first step of the survey. Conducting a survey area of hot spots of the blue sheep and snow leopard was Hemis National Park. Jigmy an assistant of the manager described us full picture of the searching site, Hemis National Park. This hotspot area was splitted in 62 blocks. Each section had numerated and specified characteristics related to land use with the following codes:

- no human use-NON,
- seasonal grazing by livestock- SGR,
- year round grazing-YRG, and
- other type of land used OTH.

We had theoretical and practical trainings on codes of SLIMS Form 2. Snow Leopard Sign Transect – Abundance Survey conducted by Rinchen (see survey forms).

Particularly was interesting to learn Snow Leopard signs in the Form #3, Definitions and Codes for SLIMS.

We had on the site clear notions about survey sites:

- Type of sites (with respect to use by snow leopard),
 - Scrape site,
 - Non relic (usually only one scrape is present at the site or all the scrapes (and feces), are about the same age and)
 - Relic (usually there are numerous (3-10) scrapes present of various ages. Due to remarking, some or most scrapes have a sculptured appearance. Feces of many different ages may also be present.
- Type of sign present at site:
 - Scrape SC scrape made by a snow leopard or other felid
 - Scratch (canid only) SR Scratch made by a canid.
 - Feces (scat) FE Scat or dropping.

- Urine UR Urination mark.
 - Scent spray RC scent mark.
 - Claw rake CL Claw mark made on a tree trunk or rock face and left by a field
 - Pugmark PU Footprint impression or track.
- Sign age or visibility (by type of sign present-very old, old, fresh and very fresh)
 - Substrate type (rock, sandy soil, gravelly soil, snow, and vegetation)
 - Sign measurement (centimeters)

During a survey in hotspot area in Hemis National Park we had a practical interpretation of different types of signs of snow leopard at the site. Scrapes, feces, pugmarks, urine sprays, scent marks, claw rakes, etc were observed and were recorded by the visitors and SLC team. We have got interesting and useful knowledge on Snow leopard's habits and traces during practical observation.

After wild life survey we made a report survey result according Box 4-1. This form was new for us and we learned how to fill in (see attached form).

Then we were introduced with Data Form for Blue Sheep/Ungulate Counts which was completely different from our data base which we used to. There were many useful and different new points with codes as sex and age composition, definition for classes, specific details about area (present area, rangeland, habitat, ruggedness, position, elevation etc.) and so definitely we use this data form in our data base (see attached form)

The Snow Leopard Conservancy team displayed their technical equipments (scope remote camera with transmitter and receiver) and demonstrated their utilization.

Lessons learned

- the data collected by SLC in Ladakh during transect surveys are much more numerous than the data collected by META in Murghab, allowing for a more thorough analysis of the results collected. These data should be little by little collected by META in Murghab. People conducting transect surveys will however need to be trained to be able to collect these additional data. The 2 participants in the Ladakh trip could act as trainers;
- the data collected is entered immediately in a data base, which allows for an immediate interpretation of the data. The data base is also more thorough than in Murghab. The data base from Ladakh shall be used to set up a more comprehensive data base in Murghab;
- once the data is collected and data based, a final survey report analyzing the data collected is compiled, and recommendations for wildlife management are being drawn. This should also be implemented in Murghab, so as to establish a clear link between transect surveys and recommendations for wildlife management. It should however be noted that for the moment, the number of transect surveys conducted in Murghab is believed to be too small to be able to draw recommendations for wildlife protection and management;

II. Wildlife and tourism

One objective of the mission was to learn how a "invisible" animal, the snow leopard, could be turned into a tourism asset.

We discussed with Snow Leopard Conservancy team on what could have interest the visitors and how to show those sites without disturbing the cat. As this animal is a unique, invisible and rear in high mountain ecosystem as a tourism asset has very limited clients, said Rinchen.

However, interpretation of traces, as well as explanations on SLC conservation activities (remove cameras, etc) are interesting for tourists, says Rinchen. Guides are trained for interpretation of snow leopard signs – and their explanation are very useful to search for sign of animals, which kind of sign is most informative, and how much effort may be required in the field, ways of distinguishing among snow leopard sign and that other predators such as wolf and lynx are provided. These information are most interesting for tourists.

It was also impressing to see that blue sheep in Ladakh could be spotted much more easily than Marco Polo sheep in Murghab, making the organization of ecotourism photo safaris much more easier. It gave us an idea of how Marco Polo sheep behavior could change if poaching was to stop in Murghab, and how Marco Polo sheep safaris could be subsequently developed.

Note: blue sheep, unlike Marco Polo sheep in Murghab, are not poached, which explains why they can be spotted within close distance. It appeared to the Tajik team that blue sheep were not poached thanks to strict control from the nature protection authorities.

Lessons learned

- Guides in Ladakh were thoroughly trained on the interpretation of wildlife signs, which has proven to be an ecotourism asset. Regular trainings on wildlife signs and interpretations should be regularly conducted in Murghab. Guides should also be trained on what is of interest for ecotourists. Indeed, even though Murghabi guides are most of the time able to interpret wildlife signs, they do not always realize that these interpretations can be of interest for tourists;

It was interesting to be familiar how SLC maintain nature tourist sites free of garbage and trash. SLC started an annual clean-up campaign to encourage community not to dispose of waste indiscriminately and now government and other agencies have joined in. Plastic bag campaign of community supported by SLC gained the support of the government, and it was decided to ban plastic bags in Leh . This action marks perfect conservation action at the community level and serves as an indicator of attitudinal change in the right direction.

Every time when we discussed with community members, representative of Ladakh government tourism department and individuals on results of SLC scheme and on best practices we were convinced that SLC actively involves local communities and key stakeholders from the planning stages onwards and encourages partnerships across sectors and organizations. Any time we could see members of the communities, representatives of local authorities, different organizations and individuals meetings and discussing different issues like natural and cultural conservancy, economic benefits of service providers, environmental awareness activities and etc. this atmosphere enabled us to feel high level community decision making and ownership in this project. This good example and practice we use in our practice.

II. Discussion with community members, officials and SLC staff on the results of SLC scheme and on best practices

- transect surveys

Due to regular trainings and participatory transect surveys community members involved in ecotourism have good knowledge on snow leopard. They know how to map snow leopard range, assess habitat conditions, identify snow leopard sign, estimate populations of snow leopard and that of large ungulates, and evaluate key management and conservation issues in the survey area. It was also interesting to see shepherds doing transect surveys, something that is not happening in Murghab.

- protected enclosures for livestock

In Ladakh, snow leopards are killed for 2 reasons:

- they are poached for their fur;
- retaliation killing as a result of attacks on livestock;

A herder who was helped by SLC to improve its livestock enclosure to protect livestock from snow leopards was interviewed. He mentioned that he was now seeing tracks of snow leopards all around its renovated pen, but that he lost none of his animals. He also mentioned to be happy as he no longer had to lie awake on the cold ground. He mentioned that SLC efforts helped local villagers and snow leopard leaving in peaceful co-existence. This statement testifies of the success of SLC in changing Ladakhis' practices.

SLC staff confirmed that for each village, where the livestock pens are made predator-proof, five or more snow leopards are protected from retaliatory killings.

Note: in Tajikistan, snow leopards attacking livestock is not an issue yet, as it happens rarely. It could however become an issue if the Marco Polo and Ibex population was to continue decreasing.

- ecotourism

Tourism is very developed in Ladakh: in 2004, about 22000 foreigners and 13000 national tourists visited Ladakh. In order to tap the Himalayas ecotourism potential, SLC initiated an ecotourism project in 2002, under UNESCO support¹.

48 home stay providers and 11 guides are providing ecotourism services in 7 valleys for the time being. We visited one valley, Rumbak, located approximately 140 km from Leh. During wild life survey we had overnight in Rumbak homestay.

We had a discussion with Young Chan Dolma, the owner of the Homestay where we spent a night. She has 3 children (the eldest son is in army, daughter is married and junior son works in Jang Tang village with his father as carpenter)

According vulnerability criteria community members selected this family. There are two sleeping rooms. All homestays provided 2 bed sheets, 2 pillow covers, phrase books and cassettes with English phrases on grant base. Every year SLC provide training on hygiene, cooking and disseminate feedback forms.

She had 10 clients this year and earned 1200 Rupies (28 USD). She says I want to have more clients; I have earned not enough money this year for surviving.

Collecting feedbacks is problematic because of remoteness of the sites. Feedback forms compiles by the homestay providers who come to Leh or by the SLC team during field trips.

¹ SLC project is a partner project of ACTED project in Eastern Pamirs.

Homestay providers half way to Rumbak organized parachute cafe, community members in turn provide different services, offering soft drinks, meals, handicraft products and etc. With a support of SLC community members collected plastic bottles, filled in with boiled water and offered to the clients in parachute cafe.

There are four tour operators providing clients to service providers. Travel agencies charge 50 rupies per person/night from homestay providers.

SLC involved 11 local guides (7 ladies) from different valleys. We had a discussion with a local guide, her name is Vinaya Bano. There is a shortage for a man, and English speaking guide, she said. Young men in the villages usually go to the cities to earn more money or join to the army. Guides provided training on wildlife observation, medicine plants and guiding skills.

Guides created their group, elected their leader and rotation way offer their services. Vinaya said that guides need English training.

The community-based tourism activities in these villages were conceived as a result of participatory planning, conducting transect-surveys and implementation of awareness campaign, and capacity building. In every home stays and canteens in the information corner we could see visual materials (posters: “Good livestock management is good for snow Leopard” and leaflets of SLC) developed by SLC. The SLC offers technical support and/or shares the cost of activities based upon a certain conditions being met by the village. These conditions clearly state that all activities must be linked to wildlife conservation; that there must be no killing of wolf pups and no retaliatory killing of snow leopards, and that 10 percent of the profit from the tourism activities must go into a village conservation fund. These Village Conservation Funds established by the support of SLC allows making profits from ecotourism be invested for community services (garbage management, etc) and small infrastructure projects.

Lessons learned:

- In Murghab, only men are for the time being involved in guiding. This is due to the fact that women are traditionally staying at home. The Ladakh experience shows women are as capable as men to guide eco-tourists. This experience will encourage META to have a more gender balanced guide selection policy;
- In Murghab, profit from ecotourism are benefiting only to individual. No community fund have been set up. Whilst the profit made by ecotourism service providers has had a very positive impact at the household level, it could be interesting for META to encourage the set up of community funds, especially now that the number of eco-tourists increases quickly. This would ensure that the benefits from ecotourism are distributed more evenly throughout the population.
- it could be interesting to distribute an English phrase book to the META service providers in order to complement the English classes currently conducted in Murghab;

Recommendations to SLC:

- increase the level of comfort of the home stays to attract more tourists and have a more important impact at the household level. Increasing the level of comfort of the homes stays could be done through additional training of home stay providers and provision of new equipment to service providers on a credit base (additional bed kits, kitchen utensils, traditional crafts to decorate home stays, etc)

III. Visit to SECMOL

SECMOL a local NGO was formed in 1988 by a small group of young people. SECMOL is trying to improve the education standard in Ladakh, mainly working with the Government Primary schools with new methodology. It was very interesting to know that SECMOL provide training the teachers in creative teaching methods in order to make schooling less painful and more joyful for children. They also provide a hostel for regular students of 11th and 12th classes. This is mainly for girl students who don't have a proper place to stay in Leh.

More interesting thing was to see the building, where wide range of technology was developing and demonstrating the use of renewable sources of energy and local materials. We were introduced a number of solar techniques and systems for space heating:

- Solar system is located on south facing walls.
- Rooms are longer on the east-west axis.
- Walls and ceilings are insulated with local materials (hey, sawdust, papers, wool and etc.)
- Thermal mass (e.g. mud, stone and concrete) are used to store heat.

They were entirely locally built and can be applicable within existing buildings.

Then we saw solar water heating. The system is constructed of locally available materials and capable of heating 20 liters of water at a time to a thermos system of 200 liters or more. Construction of barn was also interesting. The three cows of SECMOL campus stay in a very inexpensive all mud cowshed that stays at an average temperature of roughly +15 C even in January. As reward the cows give more milk, since they don't have to use the energy from the food in heating their own bodies. All the above buildings have not needed any heating for the past seven years, although Ladakhi winters are notorious, going down to -30 C.

IV. Visit to the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG)

Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) is a non government organization registered as a non profit society. Its aim is to promote ecologically and socially sustainable development which harmonizes with and builds upon traditional Ladakhi culture. This organization is trying to help to protect the environment and preserve the foundation of the traditional culture. The coordinator of LEDeG said: "We do not make a museum of our land. Rather, by building the future on own our resources and on the strength of our own traditions, we believe we can improve our material standard of living without abandoning our culture or polluting the environment.

LEDeG runs four broad programmes:

1. Information, education and cultural preservation
2. Agriculture
3. Handicrafts
4. Appropriate technology

There is a dual thrust to our programme in the field of information, education, and cultural preservation. Firstly, we are highlighting the dangers of following blindly in the footsteps of the West. Secondly, we are seeking to restore respect for the traditional culture. We try to show that we, Ladakhis, are in a privileged position compared with the west, but rather we can create our own way ahead, which could even provide useful and relevant lessons for the future of the world at large.

Ladakh has an abundance of renewable sources of energy. The sun shines all round the year, and strong winds blow along the villages like in Mughab. One of the major problems of the life is the bitter cold of winter. Traditionally, the only source of heat was the kitchen stove, which is fueled by animal dung and scrub vegetation. LEDeG has introduced and developed a number of solar techniques and systems for:

- solar water heating
- solar cooking
- the solar greenhouse
- the solar crop dryer
- hydraulic ram
- Micro hydro power and etc
- Heat storage

We were impressed and encouraged LEDeG was trying to promote a very careful development policy based on ecological principles, with an emphasis on local conditions and resources, and especially local traditions.

Lessons learnt:

Some of the insulation techniques implemented in Ladakh are developed in Murghab by ACTED (solar cookers, etc). Some are not. Amongst the techniques we saw in Ladakh, the following would be worth trying on a pilot bases in Murghab:

- Solar water heaters (it could be started as early as 2005 in META home stays)
- Solar greenhouses (this aspect is currently being discussed with ACTED Murghab agronomist);
- Heat storage (with stone, mud, etc)

Note: Mentalities regarding solar energy seem to be different in Ladakh and Murghab. In Murghab, massive subsidized coal importation during the Soviet Union mean that solar energy has never been considered as an asset. Only recently has ACTED started to promote solar energy. Some time is still needed to convince the population that it can be effective. In Ladakh, the use of solar energy is more widespread and inhabitants are more supportive of solar energy.

V. Discuss with high mountain farmers on their experiences with agriculture and borrow sample seeds

We met and discussed with rural farmers about high mountain agriculture. Despite the extreme climate, which limits the growing season in most of the region to little more than ninety day, Ladakhis have been self sufficient in virtually all of their basic needs. LEDeG's agriculture programme educates farmers about the dangers of using agricultural chemicals, promotes the importance of maintaining Ladahi's self-sufficiency through preserving and/ or building on traditional practices.

We brought potatoes and barley seeds from Ladakh and passed to agriculture department.

Lessons learnt:

- Ladakhis have developed local seeds adapted to the environment. The same should be tried in Murghab.
- Ladakhis are using only organic fertilizers. The same should be done in Murghab.

Note: the vegetation season in Ladakh is 90 days, and in Murghab it is maximum 70 days. It is therefore unlikely that agriculture will ever be as successful in Murghab as in Ladakh. It is especially believed that self sufficiency will never be reached in Murghab.

Conclusion

During our visit to SLC in Ladakh we gained important and valuable knowledge and practices how the project could proceed in order:

- preserve endangered wildlife species and integrate wildlife view into a responsible tourism product;
- to train community and META members in doing transect surveys, interpreting of signs left by prey species;
- to pass a general knowledge of using remote camera “traps” to identify individual snow leopard and closely estimate the number of cats using there are;
- to use and compile data bases collected in a survey;
- to create of a conservancy group and information office in Murghab Ecotourism office;
- to empower local people in decision making process and enhance their skill and status in conservation and sustainable development;
- to reduce stress on fuel wood consumption and explore potential for promoting alternative source of energy technology.