

Project Update: September 2015

1. In June 2015, we published 500 wild yak conservation posters. The poster contains a wild yak conservation message in Nepali and Tibetan language. Nepali is the national language of Nepal and the Tibetan texts relay the same message to the villagers of upper Humla in their mother language.

2. We conducted a 2-month (July-August) field research on wild yak in upper Humla. Equipped with all the camping gear and food supply for 2 months, we explored all the possible wild yak locations in the area. We walked 15 line transects (each 2.5 km in length) and made vantage point observations. We conducted ethno-wild yak surveys with yak herders. Similarly, we organised two conservation camps (one in the local school and the other in the monastery of Halji village). After the completion of field research, we organised a district level wild yak conservation workshop at Simkot, the headquarters of Humla district. The workshop attracted an overwhelming number of 65 participants, representing relevant government offices, non-government organisations and teachers from different schools and colleges.

3. In the field we found two old heads of wild yak in Gyau khola valley, two old horns (one each in Ngim khola valley and Mergyu khola valley), six hoof prints (four recent, one fresh and one old) in Gyau khola valley and one hair sample in Chuwa khola valley. Only one individual of wild yak was sighted in Gyau khola valley (We had seen two wild yaks about 2 km east of this location in July 2014).

4. The earthquake that struck Nepal in April largely affected our field research. We had to shift our field research for a month. When we arrived in the study area, the local people had also arrived with their domestic yaks. This made the study more challenging, as the wild yaks are known to move to far away locations in presence of the herders.

5. The wild yaks in upper Humla are migratory in nature. They stay in Nepali side when there are no people in the upper pastures. With the arrival of the herders during July 2015, they migrate to the Tibetan side. Again, when the herders leave the pastures after about a month, they move back to Nepal. Habitat encroachment by the yak herders has posed a great difficulty for the wild yaks to stay year round in the Nepali side.

6. In the last decade, eight wild yaks were killed (four in Limi valley and four in Chuwa khola valley) during different occasions. They were killed in retaliation for causing difficulty in milking the domestic yaks and due to their mating attempts with the domestic females. Some specific villagers killed them, took the meat for their own consumption (the wild yak meat is considered a delicacy and is supposed to be very nutritious) and sold the heads to the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China. The Tibetans have a tradition of putting a wild yak head at the entrance of their home to symbolise their supremacy in the society as the wild yak is the largest mammal of the landscape.

7. Wild yaks are intricately linked with the culture of the people in Limi valley. From the blood vessels of wild yak, they make a rope that is put on a bow and later during a wedding ceremony, the bridegroom hits an arrow to a wooden plate put on the waist of the bride.

Similarly, during periods of drought, body hair of wild yak are put near the water sources and worshipped, demanding the recharge of the sources.

8. The people of Limi valley make use of wild yak blood from the heart to cure lowland sickness (the opposite of altitude sickness). They also believe that the blood gives them strength, improves the immune system and cures diarrhoea. Forehead hair of wild yak is used to cure tongue wounds in children.

9. At present upper Humla is the only known refuge for the wild yaks in Nepal, which were thought to have gone regionally extinct until we rediscovered it last year. Upper Humla harbors an important mammalian fauna including Tibetan argali, Tibetan gazelle, snow leopard, wolf, Tibetan wild ass, Tibetan fox, etc. In this light, we have been proposing that the Limi valley should be declared a protected area. The stakeholders in the district headquarter and the villagers of Limi are very positive towards it.



Left: Gyau Khola valley. Middle: Gearing up. Right: Camp



Left: School workshop. Middle Community workshop at Rincheling monastery. Right: District level workshop.



Left: Ethno survey. Middle: Wild Yak in Gyau Khola. Right: Yak poster.