



Conservation Watch - Nepal

A Fortnightly Newsletter

Volume-1

Issue-22

May 1, 2009

Wildfire poses burgeoning threat to wildlife

Bhadra Sharma

Fire is a great source of survival for humans. But, it can also be a source of tragedy if someone plays with it carelessly. A raging fire spares no one -- be it living thing or non-living one. Sometime the foolishness of men leads to the destruction of flora and fauna in an amazing scale. This had exactly happened in Sankhuwasabha recently. The fire that spread in a forest due to the negligence of locals engulfed 185 yaks (*Bos grunniens*) in Puwakhola VDC. These cattle were grazing in the forest when it caught the fire.

Puwakhola locals have traditionally been sending their yaks in the forest but they were hardly aware about their silly act that could one day claim their property. Local farmers used to burn their farms before cultivating it. But this time, the fire reached beyond their land and swept away the entire nearby forest. They lost the yaks worth Rs. 4.8 million. Yaks have been the farmers' major source of earning in high mountainous region. With the death of yaks, they have not only lost the property but also became jobless. A meeting of the Natural Disaster Rescue Committee, DAO, police administration decided provide compensation of Rs. 18,000 to each of the victims in two phases. In the first phase, each victim received Rs. 3,000 in compensation. In the second phase, Rs. 15,000 will be distributed to each of the victims. The victims in their applications, however, demanded a compensation of Rs. 25,000 for per yak lost in the fire.



This sort of tragedy was first of its kind taken place in the Himalayan region. The loss of animals could be measured but the loss of wildlife, rare herbs and spices could hardly be counted in monetary term.

The frequent wildfires have converted many forests into barren lands. The fire has destroyed many National Parks, national and community forests, hillside areas and plain land in the south. Earlier, the fire used to cause great loss in the dense forest of the inner Terai but it has now spread in the Himalayan region too. We normally see the fault of people behind the growing incidents of fire. But experts point out some other thing in the rising cases of wildfires.



"It is due to the direct impact of climate change that has caused fire in the wild life. As a result, the national parks and wildlife reserved centers are not immune from the casualties of wildfire," Sundar Sharma, UNISDR, South Asia Wildlife Fire Monitor, Coordinator says. He says that the fire has cost a lot in national parks in Lamtang, Makalu, Barun, Chitwan, Bardiya, Parsa, and wildlife reserve in Dhorpatan, Annapurna and Manaslu.

Valuable herbal plants, bird spices and rare natural resources have been burnt to ashes in the forest fires. The wildfire has not only destroyed animals, birds and plants but it has also claimed the lives of humans. Over eleven individuals lost their lives in fire in March and April this year.

Udaya Raj Sharma, secretary at the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation says that the over 4 million hectares of forestland had been damaged due to fire, landslide, floods and deforestation. However the government has not collected details of wildlife casualties as well.

"Most wild animals and birds are forced to leave from their respective habitats while some are perishing in natural disasters," says Annapurnananda Das, Chief of the Planning and Resource Management at the Ministry.

He says that the Ministry lacks detailed information on the loss of flora and fauna because it has not also separate mechanism to study on them. According to the Department of Forest, a large amount of timbers have been destroyed during the summer season.

The government incurs the loss of timbers worth Rs. 8,000 millions annually due to the wildfire. This is two times of amount the government collects from the forest-based products as revenue.

The government has no scheme and policy to safeguard the natural resources from wildfire. "We have no technical manpower, programmes and policies in this regard. Wildfire victims are rarely recognised," says Das, adding that lack of both the human and financial resources is major hurdles for the forest fire management.

Wildfire experts say that it is necessary to control fire for habitat management and bio-diversity conservation. For this, they say, the capability of national parks and people need to be strengthened.

They say that over 90 percent of forest that once catches fire have lost its regeneration capacity. Rare herbs like Yarchagumba, Sheelajeet, Panchaule and so on are threatened because of forest fire. If the government will not come up with concrete vision to protect them in time, the nation is likely to suffer a huge loss. The government needs to understand their importance in time and preserve them properly.

Experts say that the temperature has gone up high throughout the world due to the effect of climate change. Nepalese Himalayas are also regarded as 'hot places' these days. Meteorologist say that the temperature in Nepalese Himalayas is increasing in the ratio of 0 to .6 degree centigrade which is five percent more than the international increasing ratio.

This indicates a horrible scenario. "People should be aware to control forest fire by adopting the preventive methods and the government should come up with concrete plan," Das adds.

Das, says that 58 percent of wildfire cases are the result of deliberate acts of people while 22 per cent of them occur due to negligence and 20 percent accidental. "Farmers believe that the regeneration capacity of forestland grows when it is burnt. This is totally a wrong conception that must be done away with to check the rampant forest fires," he says.

Poachers, smugglers get political protection !

A special mobile team, formed some three months ago to minimise the increasing threat of poaching of wild animals and wood smuggling from the forests of Banke, Bardiya and Dang districts, has failed to work effectively as poachers and smugglers have received political protection. The poachers and smugglers have also taken advantage of transitional period during when the nation has experienced failure in the effective enforcement of the rules and regulation

The special mobile team has stated that they are unable to achieve progress as they have expected in mitigating poaching and wood smuggling due to political intervention and protection to the smugglers, regular strikes and protests called by different political and other groups.

District Forest Office of Banke, Bardiya and Dang have jointly been carrying out the special mobile campaign from January 29. "We are unable to work properly due to high political pressure along with the early release of wood smugglers from the jail," said one of the district forest employees requesting anonymity. "No sooner we arrest the smugglers, politically affiliated leaders give us order to release them," the employee said.

A total of about 30 forest officers and staffs have been deployed to control the increasing threats of wood smuggling and poaching. The campaign, which has been carried out on the decision of Regional Forest Directorate, will continue till mid-August.

The staffs remained busy keeping themselves mobile round the clock at the East-West Highway that runs through Banke, Bardiya and Dang districts and round the forest area situated at the districts. The mobile team is currently at Bardiya district.

However, locals in Banke have complained that forest officials are behind the deforestation of community forests. A timber trader, on the condition of anonymity, said forest officials connive with timber smugglers in felling down trees and supplying them asking money on percentage basis from him.

On the other hand, members of Sita Community Forest Consumers' Group said that ranger Madan Chaudhary demanded Rs. 25,000 from them and contractors to renew the license of the community forest. According to District Forest Officer Shyam Prasad Sharma, consumer groups do not need to pay forest officials to renew community forests.

Contractors say that they are compelled to pay more money to forest officials compared to community forests, considered a good source of income in inner Terai and Chure Bhabar areas.

Sajiban, best alternative for fossil fuel: Experts

Incessant global demand, exhaustion due to over-exploitation and ever rising prices of fossil fuel have triggered an urgent search for a substitute fuels that are ecologically and economically viable.

The energy experts from the national and international arenas have come up with the idea 'Green Energy the Next Revolution', by planting Jatropha (Sajiban or Kadam) and carrying out industrial activities related to the extraction of bio-diesel from jatropha seeds.

Recently, these experts have launched 'Mass Jatropha Development Programme', with the theme, 'A hope to alternative clean energy solution in Nepal'.

According to them, over 500 thousands hectares of unused land in Nepal could be used for Jatropha cultivation that can produce bio-diesel and reduce dependency on imported petroleum products.

There were over 50 plants in Nepal that bears seeds and could produce oils. But Jatropha has a capacity of high oil extraction as compared to other seeds, they said.

Similarly, the cultivation of jatropha as a source of alternative energy has several benefits in an economy based mainly on agriculture. "It can solve the unemployment crisis considerably and also ensures the optimal usage of arable land," they said.

Dr. Khem Raj Bhattarai, an energy expert, claimed that Nepal was the only country that was lagging behind to tap the value of jatropha. He said that this cultivation could make Nepal independent in energy and help reduce trade deficit.

He pointed out that the Jatropha oil was superior to others oils as it had a short gestation period, easy handling, high oil extraction and superior quality of bio-diesel.

He, however, said that the lack of awareness, land use policy and plantation, research and study, reluctance of investors and availability of low population of these species in nature was the challenges that Nepal had to negotiate while promoting this product.

Prof. Dr. Jagannath Shrestha said that the fuel produced from jatropha produces less carbon emission compared to other fossil fuels. According to him, if one-liter diesel was burnt, it produces 3.5-kg carbon dioxide but jatropha had half of it.

Shyam Mohan Shrestha, chairman of the Future Energy International (FEI), said that FEI had an experienced partner company hailing from the Republic of Korea.

He said that FEI and the Korean partner company would venture for the establishment of pan-oplie natural resources that would contribute to the economy of the country and also help reduce environment degradation.

He said that FEI had planned to invest, attract investors and technical support through its worldwide connections in order to make this industry a success story in the country.

Minister for Science and Technology Ganesh Sah said that the bio-fuel was the only alternative to Nepal at the time when it was passing through problems like energy crisis, high pollution and the global warming.

He said the government had given special priority to the alternative energy sector. He committed that the government would encourage such green energy production and would make all its efforts towards using it as an alternative sources.

Jatropha is highly resistant to drought, thrives in arid areas, and requires as little as thirty liters of water a month during the non-rainy season. Animals do not eat this plant and thus is safe from them.

The plant produces oil-bearing seeds within six months of planting and can last over thirty years without replacement when managed properly. Its seeds contain thirty percent or more oil, which can be easily expelled and extracted.

Besides reducing the consumption of fossil diesel and resultant savings on their import, the use of bio-diesel confers various advantages that include significant reduction of the various pollutants in the burnt exhaust fumes produced by traditional fuels.

Government mulls to declare seven more conservation areas

Minister for Forest and Soil Conservation Kiran Gurung said the government was working out plans to declare several places across the nation as conservation areas.

According to the plan, Tinjure-Milke-JalJale of the Koshi zone, Chandragiri of Bagmati, Fewa Lake in Kaski, the entire east-west Chure stretch, Gauri Shankar and Rolwaling, among others, will be declared as conservation areas. The minister also informed that Nepal would soon hold seminars in industrialised countries, asking them to pay for the damages to Nepal's natural environment due to climate change.

Addressing a meet of climate experts and Constituent Assembly members, Gurung said Nepal will observe 2009 as the Year of Nature Conservation. The minister said Nepal would claim its rights to environment conservation during the meetings with the polluting giants.

Minister Gurung also said the ministry had sought the help of Zoological Society of London, UK and the zoos in Singapore and China to help establish a zoological park in the country. He said plans were also afoot to establish a biological research centre and an animal orphanage centre, adding that community forests would be used to generate employment opportunities for the locals. The minister said necessary amendments to existing laws and policies would be introduced to encourage commercial farming of timber and medicinal herbs.

Sunil Babu Panta, coordinator, parliamentary committee on environment, climate change and natural resource management, said the impact of climate change would first be manifest in the form of drought, flood, storm, ice-melting and increase in the sea level. Citing that Bhutan had set aside 60 percent of its total land area for forests, Panta said Nepal should also be able to earmark at least 40 percent area.

Black bucks in perilous situation

Birds decline in Koshi Tappu

Nearly three months ago, the government had received accolades when it declared Black Buck Conservation Area in Khairapur VDC of Bardiya district area covering 1,632 hectares. The conservation area includes 525 hectares of core habitat for animals, while around 1,000 hectares contain unmanaged human settlements, grassland and farms.

Despite this effort, the attempt doesnot seem to have significant effect to assuage the plight of black bucks. Five Black bucks (*Antelope cervicapra*), locally known as Krishnashar were killed in the Black Buck Conservation Area in the last two months. There were 213 black bucks, including the ones killed inside the sanctuary then.

Ram Kumar Thapa, assistant chief conservation officer at Bardiya National Park (BNP) says, though the government declared Khairapur a conservation area, human settlements around the protected area have not been evacuated till date. Meanwhile, the government has not appointed officials to manage and conserve the area.

Local encroachment of the protected area has caused grassland where black bucks graze to shrink. Likewise, the black buck's water sources are also drying up due to increased cattle grazing inside the protected area.

Shiv Raj Bhatt, senior ecologist at the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) said, evacuating human settlements around the protected area is a great challenge for the government. According to him, most parts of the protected area are habituated by Yadav communities who have been local residents for the past 20 to 25 years. Kamaiyas (bonded labourers), have also settled illegally on the protected land for the past four years. "There is urgent need to evacuate illegal settlements, while legal land owners must be compensated," Bhatta said.



Meanwhile, Bhatt said the ministry is likely to appoint a separate management team for the Black Buck conservation Area by next month. Black bucks are one among the 28 animal species listed as protected in the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973.

Similarly, in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, popularly known as 'the eastern imperial of birds', voices of birds in watershed areas has not been heard these days. It is said that the birds have flown from there due to harsh sound of the people and vehicles plying through the areas. Reserve source said birds have shifted their settlement due to noise of the equipments that are used to construct the dam of Saptakoshi River.

Koshi Tappu is famous in Asia for the habitat of birds where hundreds of species of rare birds of the world come for secure habitat. This year too, migratory birds in winter season have come fewer compared to the last year. Also, the birds that came along the change in season have gone away because of noise, as they could not find the secure place for their habitat. As per the statistics, some 486 species of birds are found during the course of their movement.

Poaching vulnerability still high on indigenous community

At the age of 19, he was arrested for being involved in rhino poaching. Four years later, in March 2009, The Hetauda Appellate Court sentenced him maximum punishment entitled for rhino poaching i.e. 15 years of jail and Rs. 100,000 fine. This is the story of Raj Kumar Kumal from Padampur VDC-3, Chitwan which clearly manifests the vulnerabilities of youth (particularly from indigenous community) towards the heinous crime. Along with the Raj Kumar, a division bench of chief judge of the court also sentenced Nara Bahadur Gurung of Chainpur VDC-6, Laxman Chaudhary and Somlal Chaudhary of Padampur-3 and Lal bahadur Kumal of Padampur-3. These all are from indigenous community of Chitwan district.

The case of Raj Kumar Kumal might be useful for the conservation practitioners and policy planners. He is one of the many people from indigenous community living around Chitwan National Park which subsistence heavily hinges upon natural resources. Though the interventions from few organizations help to refrain this impoverished group from wildlife poaching, significant achievements are yet to be attained.



Most of the people of this community still think poaching as a quick source of income against very limited and meager livelihood options available for them. Out of 249 inmates in Bharatpur jail, 111 are indicted or convicted on poaching. Nearly two-thirds of them represent indigenous and historically disadvantaged community.

Another interesting part of Raj Kumar's story is that he is the second member of his family convicted for wildlife related crime. His father is serving jail term in the case of tiger trade.

Raj Kumar was only 15 when his father was arrested. After a couple of years, a person from Indian origin (Madhesi in local language) appeared and showed him the 'way' to release his father. Unaware of the fabricated assurance, Raj Kumar was ready to go along with that person so that he could earn NRs 50,000 to keep his father out from the jail.

'My motive was only to rescue my anguishing father. I was hell-bent to prove myself as a responsible son, but of no avail', he said. He admitted that he has witnessed four rhinos being poached. However, he claimed that he did not shoot the rhinos, instead, carried the logistics. If his words are to be believed, he did not know rhino poaching was a crime which could render harsh punishment. He received 20,000 rupees for assisting in four 'venture' and still he was 30,000 rupees short of his target amount. Raj Kumar is an example which reveals how illiterate and marginalized community members are being bogged down in wildlife poaching, knowingly or unknowingly.

Conservation Journalist Ramesh Kumar Poudel suggests to intensify conservation education and awareness in the vulnerable community. 'A kind of rivalry still persists between authority and indigenous community. On the other hand, very little interventions have been made to sensitize them on conservation. It is incredibly important to bridge this gap'- he said. He also pointed out the needs to intensify livelihood support.

We hope that related stakeholders are listening.

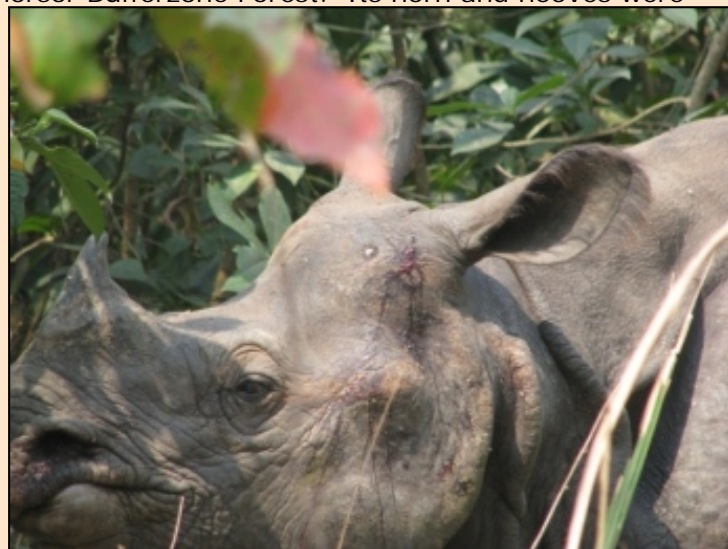
Gun shot rhino died after a week

The injured rhino found inside the bufferzone area of Chitwan National Park by the park's patrol team died on April 2. The 10-year-old rhino was found a week ago at Dulaikhola of Khorsor Bufferzone Forest. Its horn and hooves were intact.

After a post-mortem, it was found that poachers had shot four bullets in the forehead of rhino. All bullets were made of iron bearings. Iron bearings are easily available and widely used in local level, predominantly to support tractor wheels. CNP officials have suspected that poachers might have used musket guns for their cruel intention.

The pachyderm was rendered blind and deaf due to the injuries. According to Dr. Kamal Gaire, the Veterinarian at CNP, the rhinos injured from gun shot had never been recuperated in CNP history. Security guards were deployed round the clock to keep tabs on the rhino. CNP officials are unable to identify shooters.

With this death, the number of rhinos in Chitwan National Park fell to 399 from 408 after the rhino count of March 2008.



Co-Action Nepal (CAN)
Email: coaction@wlink.com.np
Bharatpur, Chitwan, Nepal, P.O. Box. 75
www.onehornedrhino.org

Chief Editor: Deepak Acharya
Assistants: Bhaskar Aryal
Santosh Joshi
D. R. Neupane