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Snow Leopards, Local People and Livestock Losses

**Finding solutions using Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA)
in the Markha Valley of Hemis National Park, Ladakh, October 6-26, 1999.**

by Rodney Jackson *

Livestock depredation is emerging as a significant issue across the Himalaya, including the Hemis National Park (HNP) in Ladakh. Some consider that this protected area harbors the best snow leopard population in India, but local herders perceive the endangered snow leopard as a serious threat to their livelihood.

A survey sponsored by the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT) found high rates of crop damage from blue sheep, and livestock depredation by snow leopard and wolf in nearly all of the 15 settlements of HNP. Interviews with village leaders, farmers and herders representing 79 households indicated that a total of 492 animals (with a market-value estimated at Rupees one million (US\$2,300) were killed by predators between January 1998 and March 1999.

The worst case involved a snow leopard that entered a nighttime village corral and then killed 53 sheep and goats belonging to a single household. In 1996, the Ladakh Wildlife Department initiated a compensation program, but by late 1997 the number of claims filed exceeded the budget allocated and the Department was forced to suspend the program. Consequently, relations between wildlife officials and local people have also suffered, making management of this important protected area more difficult.

A People-Wildlife Planning Workshop was convened in Leh and the Markha valley of Hemis National Park in an attempt to seek alternative solutions to this vexing problem. Sponsored by ISLT, and with the collaboration of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), the objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Prepare an Action Plan assisting villagers and the local protected area authority (Jammu & Kashmir Wildlife Department) to identify cost-effective, sustainable and ecologically compatible means for reducing livestock losses, especially from snow leopard;
2. Train representatives from local NGOs and villagers in Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action techniques pertaining to applied People-Wildlife management; and
3. Increase understanding and awareness about people-wildlife relationships, in particular the importance of conserving snow leopards, their prey and habitat.

The three-day introductory workshop session in Leh was attended by 26 representatives from non-governmental organisations, government and the general public. It highlighted the need to increase public awareness of snow leopard conservation and the importance of Hemis National Park as a significant repository of high-altitude trans-Himalayan biodiversity. Participants developed an Action Plan, using a special food-web poster and game, for implementation over the next year in local schools and villages by LEDeG, SECMOL, and Leh Nutrition Project (LNP) with ISLT providing training and materials.

This was followed by a 14-day session in Markha village, a hamlet of 26 households located in prime snow leopard habitat in Hemis National Park. It was attended by 14 persons (including resource specialists) from LEDeG, Leh Nutrition Project, Sheep Husbandry Department, Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife Department, Autonomous Hill Council, WWF-India, a University, The Mountain Institute (Nepal and Sikkim) and the International Snow Leopard Trust (India and USA).

The Mountain Institute provided workshop facilitation, using a highly participatory planning process known as Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA) which draws upon traditional Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools. APPA operates under the premise that the best results occur when local communities take a leadership role, focus on their opportunities rather than problems, and build on past successes. It is practiced through a four-step iterative process (4-D*s) which seeks to build consensus through:

1. discovering the community*s strengths and valued resources (Discovery);
2. envisioning short-term and long-term development scenarios if feasible resources were suitably mobilized and the community acted in concert (Dream);
3. designing an action plan for guiding change in ways that emphasize what the community can accomplish on its own while diminishing long-term dependence on outside financial and technical resources (Design); and
4. spurring participants to begin realistic community-improvement actions immediately, rather than waiting for external agents to act (Delivery).

Workshop participants were trained in each technique after which villagers participated in the sequential series

of planning exercises, including resource mapping, seasonal agricultural activities, trend-lines, the delineation of depredation “hotspots” and ranking of pastures, sources of livestock mortality, indigenous livestock guarding methods and “good shepherding practices,” income sources and opportunities, and the nature of existing village institutions. These activities indicated that the greatest loss resulted from snow leopards killing livestock in the night-time corrals located in Markha*s winter pastures, and that the problem could be largely or entirely avoided by ensuring all corrals were predator-proof.

Using similar participatory tools, workshop participants and villagers then spent several days discussing, designing and refining a set of remedial measures to reduce depredation losses which:

1. met the funding conditions set by the donor (ISLT); and
2. achieved high design standards mutually agreeable to all parties, including the experts attending the workshop.

To receive donor support, the solution had to benefit both snow leopards and humans, involve a significant contribution (such as labor or materials) from the community, benefit all households, be monitored to ensure proper implementation, and have a designated party be responsible for maintaining any infrastructural improvement. The preferred solution had to comply with park regulations, be ecologically sound, socially responsible and cost-effective.

The participants concluded that the best solution involved the replacement of the four existing corrals with predator-proof structures constructed of stone and mortar with a wire-mesh roof. An Action Plan was prepared listing each of the activities to be undertaken, where, by whom, by when, along with an indicator(s) for measuring the effectiveness of the undertaking.

An agreement was drawn up and signed specifying the conditions, roles and responsibilities of the signatory parties, namely ISLT and the leaders for each corral user group.

The Markha villagers agreed to provide all labor and onsite materials (stone and mud) required for corral improvement, while ISLT provided off-site materials

(wire mesh, roofing poles, doors and related hardware) along with technical assistance and oversight. ISLT also agreed to provide mesh for predator-proofing corral windows in Markha and Chalak, under the stipulation that the owners assume responsibility for strengthening the doors if required to prevent predators from entering the pen. Project activities will be implemented this winter and early spring, under an Memorandum of Understanding with the LNP (the most active local NGO in Hemis National Park) and supported by ISLT's staff in India.

Workshop participants recommended that the APPA approach be applied in other settlements to reduce people-wildlife conflicts due to crop and livestock

damage. Such participatory planning initiatives could be undertaken by a small team of 2-3 trained persons from local NGOs and government line agencies. Participants felt that this approach is especially helpful in strengthening local capacity for planning and development, and in making such interventions more effective, less costly and more sustainable. Finally, it was recommended that a community-based tourism training workshop be held in Ladakh in order to explore options for increasing trekking revenues for local people as a means of helping to offset livestock and crop losses.

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