

Relationship between Illegal Wildlife Trade and Community Conservation: A Case Study of the Chepang Community in Nepal

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Abstract : Illegal Wildlife Trade is one of the most pressing global conservation challenges. Unregulated wildlife trade can threaten biodiversity, contribute to habitat loss, limit sustainable development efforts, and expedite species declines and extinctions. In low-income and middle-income countries, such as Nepal and other countries in Asia and Africa, many of the people engaged in the early stages of illegal wildlife trade, which includes the hunting and transportation of wildlife, belong to Indigenous tribes and local communities. These countries primarily rely on punitive measures to prevent and suppress Illegal Wildlife Trade. For example, in Nepal, people involved in wildlife crimes can often be sentenced to incarceration and a hefty fine and serve up to 15 years in prison. Despite these harsh punitive measures, illegal wildlife trade remains a significant conservation challenge in many countries. The aim of this study was to examine factors affecting the participation of Indigenous communities in Illegal Wildlife Trade while recording the experiences of members of the Indigenous Chepang community, some of whom were imprisoned for their alleged involvement in rhino poaching. Chepangs, belonging to traditionally a hunter-gatherer community, are often considered an isolated and marginalized Indigenous community, some of whom live around the Chitwan National Park in Nepal. Established in 1973, Chitwan National Park is situated in the Chitwan Valley of Nepal and was one of the first regions that was declared as a protected area in Nepal, aiming to protect the one-horned rhinoceros as a flagship species. Conducted over a period of three years, this study used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to collect data from Illegal Wildlife Trade offenders, family members of offenders, community Elders, NGO personnel, community forest representatives, Chepang community representatives, and Government school teachers from the region surrounding Chitwan National Park. The study also examined the social, cultural, health, and financial impacts that the imprisonment of offenders had on the families of the community members, especially women and children. The results suggest that involvement of the members of the Chepang community living around Chitwan National Park in the poaching of the one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) can be attributed to a range of factors, some of which include: lack of livelihood opportunities, lack of awareness regarding wildlife rules and regulations and poverty. This work emphasises the need for raising awareness and building programs to enhance alternative livelihood training and empower indigenous and marginalised communities that provide sustainable alternatives. Furthermore, the issue needs to be addressed as a community solution which includes all community members. We suggest this multi-pronged approach can benefit wildlife conservation by reducing illegal poaching and wildlife trade, as well as community conservation in regions with similar challenges. By actively involving and empowering local communities, the communities become key stakeholders in the conservation process. This involvement contributes to protecting wildlife and natural ecosystems while simultaneously providing sustainable livelihood options for local communities.

Keywords : alternative livelihoods, chepang community, illegal wildlife trade, low-and middle-income countries, nepal, one-horned rhinoceros

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