



Environment
Canada

Environnement
Canada

National Wildlife Research Centre,
Raven Road, Carleton University
Ottawa, ON K1A 0H3
Canada.

Canadian Wildlife
Service

Service canadien
de la faune

September 19, 2012

Some thoughts on the Great Himalayan National Park

In 1977 I conceived the idea for a survey of forests in the western Himalayas to assess the status of biodiversity in the region. Beginning in 1978, with two fellow graduates from Oxford University, we created and led the Himachal Wildlife Project, a collaboration between UK and US-based wildlife specialists and the Himachal Wildlife Department, with the involvement of the Zoological Survey of India and WWF-India. Over two years, the project carried out extensive surveys of forests in Himachal Pradesh to identify areas where high biodiversity values indicated the need for better environmental protection.

As a result of these surveys we made a recommendation to the Wildlife Department that the upper watersheds of the Sainj and Tirthan streams, (the current GHNP), constituted an exceptionally rich area for both flora and fauna, especially those characteristic of the middle-altitude forests of the Western Himalayas, elsewhere greatly reduced by the expansion of temperate agriculture. We suggested that they constituted the best-preserved examples of temperate and subalpine forest that we had seen and deserved the highest level of protection.

The relatively untouched nature of the area probably was the result of the steepness of the valleys and the lack of any outlet across the Great Himalayan range. The lack of any pass leading to the trans-Himalayan pastures of Spiti meant that migrant herds of sheep and goats did not transit the area in any numbers, reducing the impact of domestic grazing on the forest flora.

Our early surveys established that the area supported a more or less complete set of the birds and large mammals characteristic of the western Himalayas, including several red-listed species, of which the most important was the Western Tragopan. Subsequent work by the Wildlife Institute of India, as well as later surveys by members of the HWP and by other visiting researchers, have confirmed that the vegetation is, as we had suggested originally, peculiarly diverse and representative of the region.

The setting up by the Govt of Himachal Pradesh, of the Great Himalayan National Park, brought to fruition a dream that I and my colleagues, Drs Malcolm Hunter (University of Maine) and Peter Garson (University of Newcastle) had long cherished. Moreover, the subsequent management of the Park, especially the satisfactory removal of grazing rights, achieved with adequate compensation, has created one of the very few areas of the Himalayas where ecosystems of the subalpine and alpine ecozones can be studied and appreciated without the over-riding pressure of heavy domestic grazing. Although the ecology of the Park still shows clearly the imprint of former grazing regimes, a recovery is taking place rapidly. The result will create an area where the entire vegetation and faunal zonation of the Western Himalayas, from 1600 m to >4000 m can be seen in a more or less natural (pre-grazing) state. This will have enormous scientific significance, as well as

... supports
... of the year
... was the

September 10, 1994

providing trekkers and tourists with a fascinating insight into a Himalayan world that hardly exists elsewhere.

Although it is the spectacular scenery and vistas of the high meadows and the large mammal fauna, including black and brown bears, bharal, serow and Himalayan tahr, which seem at first sight the most significant features of the Park, from a scientific perspective it is the forests of the intermediate altitude zones, from 1600-3000 m, which probably constitute the most unique aspect of the Park. These forests support a good diversity of trees and shrubs, as well as abundant ground vegetation. This diversity, in turn, supports a wide range of birds and insects. The relative poverty of such ecosystems elsewhere in the western Himalayas makes the Great Himalayan Park a unique laboratory for the study of middle-altitude ecosystems and an important repository of global biodiversity.

Although my personal role in the Great Himalayan National Park story concluded long ago, the knowledge that something for which I provided the initial spark has become such an important element in the protection of west Himalayan biodiversity remains the achievement of which I am most proud in a lifetime of wildlife research and conservation.

Sincerely



Anthony Gaston
Senior Research Scientist
Wildlife Research Division, Environment Canada
National Wildlife Research Centre
Carleton University
Ottawa K1A 0H3
613-998-9662; tony.gaston@ec.gc.ca