



THE GREAT HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK (GHNP)

ELOQUENT MOUNTAINS

The GHNP is unique with its unabashed, untamed, unspoiled, and unmitigated milieu, which is difficult to find elsewhere in the Western Himalayas

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS: SANJEEVA PANDEY

The proportion of arrival of a new breed of 'ecotourists' at the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh is rapidly on the increase. The uniqueness of this Park lies in its 'roadlessness'. The location of GHNP is remote and inaccessible, a reason for less than 1,000 trekkers in a year. Only those who are

attracted to remote forest areas, adventure and serious trekking come to the Park. In GHNP, nature is in its wildest form, in its purest essence, in its most ancient presence. A trekker coming around the turn on a trail, sees incredible views of flowers blooming in the green grass, clouds losing themselves in the trees, and the trees in view one moment disappearing the next. The

breathtaking views and adventure in the Park are not a routine experience; they give a trekker a chance to live beyond the ordinary.

GHNP is a representative protected area of the Western Himalayas, considered an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) by Birdlife International, supporting many restricted-range species. It is also recognised as a Conservation International Biodiversity hotspot. In GHNP, the monsoon-affected forests and alpine meadows of the Himalayan front ranges support a unique biota comprised of many distinct altitude-sensitive ecosystems.

The Park has been constituted as a representative area to conserve the unique biological diversity of

the Western Himalayas. The 755 square km area of the Park is naturally protected by high mountain ridges and peaks on its northern, eastern and southern sides. However, the western side is inhabited by 1,500-1,700 households in 130 villages spread over the 265 square km buffer zone of the Park. Most of the population here is poor and depends on natural resources for livelihoods. The extraction of medicinal plants and animal husbandry have been two traditional livelihood activities of the local people. The distant villages in the buffer zone have pervasive poverty, are close to forests rich in biodiversity, and show a limited reach of government development programmes.

As a trekker ascends the mountain slopes from the bottom of the valley at an altitude of about 1,700 metres, both the flora and fauna changes quite dramatically. Huge trees of horse chestnut, walnut, 'ban' oak and rhododendrons occur in riparian areas up to 2,500 metres. Onwards, the dominance of conifers such as blue pine, west Himalayan silver fir, west Himalayan spruce, and Himalayan cedar is seen up to about 3,000 metres. The 'ban' oak of lower altitude is replaced by green oak at about 2,700 metres, and then brown oak takes over from 3,000 metres till the alpine areas. Yew (*Taxus baccata*) is an important medicinal tree of the under-storey. A rich variety of shrubs and patches of Ringal bamboo (*Arundinaria spathiflora*) are found as a dense under-storey.

Similarly, animals occupy their niche with the change of altitude: the goral (*Naemorhedus goral*), a small goat-antelope, is found in the lower forests. In the higher forests, the Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) is spread well into the alpine zone. Above the tree-line, big herds of the *bharal*, or blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), can be seen. These mammals are prey for leopards (in the forest zone) and snow leopards (above the tree-line). Himalayan black bears inhabit the forests, while Asiatic brown bears occur on the alpine meadows.

Trekking in the remote alpine zone of the Park rewards one with stunning and beautiful landscapes. Shrubs of *Rhododendron campanulatum* form *Krummholz* patches in the sub-alpine zone. At about 3,700



Krumholtz at Dhel (3,737metres) (preceding pages)

At the base of a fir tree, more than 5 metres in diameter, in Sainj Valley (2,800 m) (left)





Ferns on a wet rock (above)

Saussurea obvallata, or *Brahma Kamal*, (right) in Jiwa Nal Valley (4,000 metres)



metres, bushes of *Juniperus communis*, *J. pseudosabina*, *Lonicera*, *Berberis*, *Cotoneaster*, *Viburnum*, *Rosa* add to the beauty and wilderness of meadows. There are a number of man-made clearings/grasslands (by graziers) within the forest areas locally known as *thaach*, earlier used as grazing and camping ground for the migratory livestock (cattle, sheep and goats). Habitats constantly unfold as the explorer passes through them: the *Aconitum violaceum*, *Salvia moorcroftiana*, *Viola serpens*, *Jurinea macrocephala*, *Rheum emodi*, *Berginia ciliata*, *Picrorhiza kurroo*, *Saussurea graminifolia*, form the awe-inspiring and colourful alpine flora above 4,000 metres.

The Park supports critically important populations of the endangered western tragopan, chir pheasant, Himalayan tahr, snow leopard and musk deer. The local legend in Kullu tells that God created the tragopan out of the most beautiful feathers donated by the smaller birds in the universe. The western tragopan, the undisputed 'King of Birds', though globally endangered, is in good numbers in the Park. The presence of the headwaters of the Tirthan, Sainj, Jiwa Nal and Parvati makes GHNP one of the most sacred regions in Himachal Pradesh. It also enriches the hill state and the plains of India with precious fresh water.

The aggregate beauty of GHNP's habitats and landscapes over a wide range makes a case for the Park in terms of exceptional beauty



Camping site at Parkachi meadow in Sainj Valley

and aesthetic importance. There are 46 peaks in GHNP higher than 5,000 metres, and two higher than 6,000 metres. Taken together, this is a concentration of high peaks far greater than in most other parts of the Western Himalayas. GHNP has several high valleys and meadows of unequalled beauty (such as the Jiwa Nala and Parvati valleys, and meadows of Dhel, Nada, Guntrao, Khorli Poi, Khandedhar, Parkachi, and Asurbagh), arguably even surpassing the acknowledged visual impact of the Valley of Flowers.

Apart from being known as the most important site in India for the endangered western tragopan, there are four other pheasant species in or adjacent to the Park. The one most likely to be seen by trekkers is the Himalayan monal, abundant in the higher forests, although rather shy. Raptors are also a prominent feature of the Park, with lammergeiers, Himalayan griffon

vultures and golden eagles being seen regularly.

In addition to its biological diversity, the GHNP is unique with its unabashed, untamed, unspoiled, and unmitigated milieu, which is difficult to find elsewhere in the Western Himalayas. With a network of roads spreading into interior Himalayas, it often becomes hard to come by environs in India or Nepal forests which have not been trekked. Moreover, climbers leave a lot of garbage all over the place... one cannot escape humanity. But only adventurers choose GHNP for getting the experience of coming face-to-face with primordial nature as it has always been.

Lot of serious trekking in GHNP is on trails washed out by storms and strewn with uprooted trees; a kind of experience, if you knew what you were getting into, you might not have chosen to undertake. The fact is that the place is so enor-

mously primitive that walking up a trail that comprises slick rock, slick mud, slick leaves, hardly anything that is trust-worthy, and washed away bridges, gives a sense of deep adventure. It is not about a trail so wide that it is easy to find; the journey so often done. In the Park it is about finding your way along trails that are ancient and earthly beautiful. Perhaps, not many of us will say that that is what adventure is really about. The Park management is very conscious of the reality of poor quality of trails, bridges or unattended landslides. The fragile ecosystems of the Park are evolving with very little human intervention. This allows only for few visitors in a year coming to the Park. The Park brochure describes no-road connectivity as one of the its assets.

Since the formal establishment of the GHNP in 1999 following the resolution and elimination of traditional rights, conservation efforts



Rakti Sar (4,500 metres), the origin of Sainj River (**above**)

An ancient *Taxus baccata* tree (Himalayan yew) in Sainj Valley, 2,900 metres (**right**)

Local deity at Dhel meadow (3,737 metres) (**below**)

have effectively restricted entry and drastically reduced human impact. The restoration and rejuvenation of natural systems is facilitating the return of all the Park's habitats to a more natural and undisturbed condition. The American model of protected areas (inspiration from the world's first national park, Yellowstone, established in 1872) being isolated from human habitation and exploitation has resulted in inevitable conflict with local communities. In GHNP the Park management works with the local people so that the animals and plants could remain safe from their interference.

As the Director of the Park for eight years and the one who has trekked more than 2,500 km in all the four GHNP valleys of Tirthan, Sainj, Jiwanal and Parvati, I will advise a trekker to respect nature, its climate, and strenuous ascends



and descends. Within Kullu Valley, the four valleys of Park are quite insulated and remote with their own micro-climate and weather. At higher elevations, I have experienced unexpected thunderstorms which can soak an unprepared trekker. Just as quickly, the storm can pass, leaving the sky saturated with azure blue. Moreover, venturing in the rugged, verdant and stunning

Himalayan landscape can make one a total stranger in a common world. A GHNP trek can change you forever as one is touched by the immensity and grandeur of eloquent and majestic mountains. For a city dweller, getting brushed by such a wilderness can even mute his/her goals of ambition and desire. Among the vastness of nature, one feels like a titch, so small that big-

gest egos start melting. Beware, the place can bring in irreversible change in one's personality.

The areas of GHNP and adjacent sanctuaries were identified to be constituted in a National Park as the human impact on natural ecosystems had been lower here than in other parts of the Western Himalayas. The GHNP represents the best chance for scientists and explorers to observe a full range of West Himalayan montane ecosystems, from temperate to alpine, within a compact and well-protected and defensible area. This, in turn, enables protection of high numbers of threatened flora and fauna, addresses conservation of biodiversity in a 'mega-diverse' country, and allows conservation of a compact and unfragmented Himalayan ecosystem. Indeed, the GHNP is an investment in the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of Indians as individuals, and Himachalis in particular. It is a gainful investment in something as simple and fundamental as good citizenship: love of nature and appreciation of the natural and historic fabric of western Himalayas. ■

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Blue sheep, or bharal, in spring at Tirath (4,000 metres), Tirthan Valley

