

Ibex, bears and Marco Polo sheep: Warzone conservation in Afghanistan (Book review)

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Ibex, bears and Marco Polo sheep

ANDREW HARVEY

Alex Dehgan

THE SNOW LEOPARD PROJECT
And other adventures in warzone conservation
278pp. New York: Public Affairs. £20.99
(US \$28).
978 1 61039 695 0

Watching the news on television, one would be forgiven for thinking that Afghanistan has little to offer in the way of wildlife, but the dusty plains of Helmand are not typical of the country as a whole. In fact Afghanistan has a highly diverse environment, extending from hot subtropical desert to permanent snow. It also lies at the junction of several bio-geographical regions. In the south lies an extension of the Saharo-Sindian region, stretching through Arabia and the Sahara to the Atlantic. The south-east of the country is in the Indian region, while the north shares its flora and fauna with the Iranian plateau. Within historical memory, tigers have prowled and otters have swum through the marshes of the Amu Darya, and Asiatic lions have roamed the southern plains. Leopard, cheetah, striped hyena, brown bear, Asiatic black bear, wolves and several smaller cat species and mustelids have been recorded. The Himalayan region, created by the massive uplift caused by the collision of India with Asia, has its own endemic species such as the Marco Polo sheep, the Markhor and the Snow leopard. The country's small but fragile wetlands, such as the Kol-e Hashmat Khan just outside Kabul, are vital staging posts for waterfowl migrating between Siberia and India.

But thirty years of war did not deal kindly with Afghanistan's wildlife. The breakdown of law and order, the availability of modern military firearms and the over-exploitation of natural resources by a population desperate to survive all contributed to its destruction. Illegal logging destroyed the forests. Yet the country was fortunate in having an eloquent and charismatic advocate for the environment in the person of Prince Mostapha Zaher, grandson of the last king, who had been a keen hunter and conservationist and had designated certain key areas as royal hunting reserves. These would have become national parks had not the Russian invasion intervened. His reign is remembered, perhaps through rose-tinted spectacles, as a prewar idyll of peace and stability. The Prince's authority and influence enabled him to promote an extremely far-reaching Environment Law and become Director-General of the newly empowered National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA). In his words, far from being a luxury, environmental protection was vital for the survival of the 80 per cent of the population who live in the rural areas and depend on the natural resources of their environment for pasture,

soil, water and fuel. The US military took this wisdom on board and USAID funded a project to promote biodiversity, implemented by the Wildlife Conservation Society (aka the Bronx Zoo) and led by Alex Dehgan, an Iranian-American who had worked for the State Department and also studied lemurs in Madagascar.

The period covered in this book was probably the best time to have worked in Afghanistan. It was still possible to move freely around Kabul and drive to Badakhshan. Dehgan describes the strange world of the Kabul expatriates: the collection of chancers, humanitarians, security men, experts of various sorts, refugees from themselves, and our own “peculiar but strangely charismatic Rory Stuart [sic]”, who migrate from one post-conflict or disaster area to the next. Following them was a caravan of service providers – Thai, Chinese, Lebanese, French, Texan, Iranian and Turkish operators of restaurants and bars – creating its own bubble, isolated from the Kabul of the Afghans. For those in search of romance, “the odds were good, but the goods were odd”.

A major concern was the illegal trade in wildlife. Foreign military and aid personnel had stimulated demand for furs, including Snow leopard, and the ready availability of modern firearms had stimulated the supply, playing havoc with the remaining populations of carnivores. Training the Afghan Customs officers and the US military police to recognize and confiscate skins of protected species seems to have greatly dampened down the trade, and Dehgan was gratified to find that the fur dealers were willing to co-operate in protecting their country’s wildlife.

An area that demanded the project’s immediate attention was the Wakhan, the panhandle in the far north-east of the country, home to the Wakhi and Kyrgyz nomads and, most signifi-



Qala-i-Panja high school, Wakhan, Afghanistan

cantly, the Marco Polo sheep, the Ibex, the Markhor and their predator the Snow leopard. Here the problems were overgrazing by livestock threatening the wild herbivores and revenge killing of Snow leopards that had taken livestock. Work with the communities to provide incentives to resolve these conflicts was an important part of the WCS programme. But the first area to be declared a national park was the Band-i-Amir lakes in Bamian province. Here

natural travertine dams have created a series of seven lakes filled with gin clear water that shines a startling blue. Although listed for protection as a park in 1973, it was damaged by pollution and misuse from the “first violators of the law”, corrupt police and government officials. With the support of Habiba Sarabi, Afghanistan’s first woman provincial governor, a community-based management system was established, the necessary park infrastructure

set up and the polluting motor boats banished. An initial survey by WCS indicated that Persian leopard, Himalayan lynx, Pallas’ cat, wolves, Siberian ibex and Urial probably occurred in the area of the park.

The most heartening aspect of the book is the enthusiasm of Afghans themselves to preserve their wildlife, which they see as a vital part of their national identity. This book is a tribute to them.

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