

## CONSUMING WILDLIFE

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Disturbing? Stomach churning? Saddening! While surveying the remote and stunningly beautiful Apatani Valley near the Talley Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh, we felt a whole gamut of emotions when we saw numerous clouded leopard skins in hamlet after hamlet, where they were displayed as trophies. We learnt from locals that they usually hunt the cats at mid-day and that the pelts fetch them up to Rs. 6000 a piece.



Rarely seen in the wild, the secretive clouded leopard represents tropical rainforests and evolutionary success. When Charles Darwin wrote that it is not the strongest of species or the most intelligent but the one that is most adaptable to change that will survive, he possibly did not expect the relentless persecution we humans are capable of. No animal, including the clouded leopard, can adapt to the kind of intensive hunting that they are subjected to, especially in Northeast India. Globally, a species or a landscape is conserved either by designating protected areas or by having legislations and regulations to protect them. India has successfully enhanced its protected area network and has a vast legislative framework for wildlife conservation. However, these efforts seem to have had little effect on wildlife conservation in Northeast India due to the strong traditional natural resource use practices of indigenous communities. Resource constraints available to the conservation agencies also limit the government's ability to run successful conservation programmes here.

### Silent forests

In Arunachal Pradesh, hunting has been practiced by 26 major indigenous communities and 110 minor ones for food and medicine and as a part of traditional rituals and customs for aeons. Hunting is a source of cash income and continues to thrive. Almost every species is hunted. Large mammals, birds and reptiles, including the endangered and vulnerable species such as tiger, clouded leopard, wild dog, snow leopard, takin, barking deer, Malayan giant squirrel, wild pig, great hill barbet, pheasants and the green rat snake—the list is endless—

are hunted for sustenance and commercial purposes. The state has a large extent of its land under traditional tribal ownership, and the communities' dependence on natural resources has affected most of the designated protected areas, which in reality are just protected on paper.

The continuing hunting practices will have a negative impact on species and the ecosystem as a whole. The effects will vary from species to species, depending on their natural traits. Studies conducted elsewhere in similar tropical rainforests suggest that extensive hunting will result in reduction of numbers and lead to local extinctions. Some studies have demonstrated that large animals with low reproductive rates are most susceptible to over-exploitation, particularly primates and felids, compared with more productive species, such as rodents and smaller ungulates, that show a greater tolerance for relatively intensive hunting. It is also well known that almost all species have a role to play in the ecosystem. For example, primates account for a bulk of the medium-sized mammalian biomass in many tropical forests, and they play a vital role in seed dispersal and germination.

How do we address this critical issue of wildlife hunting? What are the research, management and developmental interventions required to tackle this issue? A multi-pronged approach that links human prosperity and conservation is vital. In Arunachal Pradesh, wildlife is primarily hunted for sustenance since it provides daily dietary protein to the rural communities. The weak economy of the state encourages a dependence on wildlife for income as well. The first step is to collect much-needed basic ecological data (status, distribution, density and rates of change) for the species that are being hunted while continually monitoring exploited species to prevent further declines and possible extinction. Studies on the level of dependence on different species by various communities, behavioural responses of wild animals to hunting, documentation of hunting techniques, investigation on the market linkages and examination of harvest patterns to assess their sustainability and socioeconomic circumstances are also essential. Law enforcement should be carried out cautiously but very strictly, beginning with the protected areas.



Garnering local support for conservation should be the utmost priority. Previous conservation efforts such as convincing the Nyshi tribes to wear fibreglass hornbill beaks have borne fruit and stemmed the hunting of the birds for their beaks. Hornbill populations have bounced back in those areas where efforts have been undertaken. Working and convincing the locals is time consuming, but with sustained good science and efforts, we can address this challenge effectively. Tackling wildlife hunting should be addressed from both the conservation and development perspectives and will require an interdisciplinary approach incorporating social, economic, ecological and political components. WHAT WE NOW HAVE IS A TOOL BOX. No one tool is going to fix the car!