

DISTRIBUTION AND PRESENT STATUS OF WILD SHEEP
IN PAKISTAN

T.J. Roberts; P.O. Box 3311, Malir City Post Office, Karachi 23; Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The following report is based on a review of relevant literature, as well as recent interviews with people knowledgeable about the present status of wild sheep in Pakistan. Four different types of wild sheep inhabit suitable habitats in Pakistan. Three are subspecies of the Urial or Asiatic Red Sheep (*Ovis orientalis*): 1) the Baluchistan Urial or "Gad" (*O.o. blanfordi*); 2) the Punjab Urial (*O.o. punjabiensis*), and 3) the Shapu or Himalayan Urial (*O.o. vignei*); the fourth wild sheep is a subspecies of Argali (*Ovis ammon*), the Marco Polo's sheep (*O.a. polii*). All these sheep are threatened because of ongoing illegal hunting and competition with domestic stock.

METHODS

Early in 1985 government staff and other people knowledgeable about the status of wild sheep in their respective areas were interviewed. Data based on these interviews were supplemented by a review of relevant literature as well as personal observations. Since few detailed surveys have been undertaken in this country, the population data provided are estimates only. The attached map (Fig. 1) gives the localities mentioned in the text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

URIAL OR ASIATIC RED SHEEP (*Ovis orientalis*)

Pakistan still has three somewhat disjunct and distinct populations which have been assigned to three sub-species. All are threatened due to continuing hunting pressure and competition from domestic grazing stock. There has been a total ban on all hunting of mammals for the past two years in Pakistan but this has been impossible to enforce, especially in the remoter mountain areas along the western and northern mountainous boundaries of Pakistan.

Fig. 1:
Distribution of Wild Sheep in Pakistan



BALUCHISTAN URIAL, OR "GAD" (Ovis orientalis blandfordi)

This subspecies is characterized by a slimmer longer-legged build than the other two races, with males carrying a long and flowing neck ruff of white and black hairs. The horns tend to be smaller in circumference than in the other two races, but in mature males grow into an almost complete concentric ring and measure in overall length more than Punjab specimens.

It is still very widely distributed from arid ranges along the Mekran coast, eastwards to the hill ranges on the borders of Sind province and with scattered population on nearly all the major mountain ranges in northern and central Baluchistan. Unfortunately no comprehensive surveys have ever been conducted in all these mountain ranges and those in southern Baluchistan are unapproachable by road and often politically inaccessible as well. Reports indicate that it is everywhere subject to some hunting pressure from local villagers most of whom include one or two professional hunters, except in Sind where it is protected. Here, there are two populations which are monitored. One in the Marri Mangthar range about 40 miles due north of Karachi comprises between 40 to 50 animals. In the Kirthar National Park further north in Dadu district between 400 and 500 are now estimated to survive on the Kambhu and Kirthar ranges where they are sympatric with Sind Ibex (Capra hircus) (Malik Asad Khan, Honorary Wildlife Warden and tribal chief of the area, Pers. Comm., April 1985).

In Baluchistan there are recent confirmed reports of small numbers surviving in the Tobakakar Range, in Mashlaq Reserve south of Chaman, on the western slopes of the Chiltan Hills, on the Takhatu Range, as well as further south in the Kharan Hills and Hinglaj Range. After discussion with Mohammed Aslam, Divisional Forest Officer (Wildlife) for the province of Baluchistan (April, 1984), and with Mr. Hamid Ali, Deputy Conservator (Wildlife) in the National Council for Wildlife Preservation, Islamabad in April 1985, an intelligent guess of the total Baluchistan population (excluding Sind) is between 2,500 and 3,000, but most of these animals comprise small isolated populations on scattered mountain ranges, hence all are vulnerable, especially as nomadic tribes graze their sheep and goat flocks in all these ranges except the Chiltan hills which are a National Park and Wildlife Reserve.

PUNJAB URIAL (Ovis orientalis punjabiensis)

This animal is characterized by a very poorly developed chest ruff, often absent in 2nd. and 3rd. year males. Also the horns are more massive than in other sub-species, tending to be less re-curved and to slope backwards.

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) (Pakistan) carried out detailed surveys in 1972-73 and sixteen small scattered populations were located in various parts of the northwest Punjab Salt Range area, with two major concentrations in the Kalla Chitta Hills and in the Kalabagh Sanctuary in the Jabbah Valley (Z.B. Mirza, mimeographed reports, 1974). No recent surveys appear to have been attempted, but enquiries reveal that the Kalla Chitta population has suffered very heavy poaching pressure, in which, regrettably the Wildlife Department officials have been involved (Major Amanullah Khan, former administrator WWF Pakistan, Pers. Comm, March 1985). According to Mr. Zahid Beg Mirza, the total population outside of the Jabbah Valley (a sanctuary) is not more than 500 and probably well below 300, in view of adverse reports about the Kalla Chitta Hills.

Jabbah Valley was declared a WWF Sanctuary in 1970 and is owned and protected by the Nawab of Kalabagh. During studies there by Dr. George Schaller in 1970-71, he estimated a population of about 500 (Schaller, Mountain Monarchs and other publications). Since then the herd was reported to have increased to "over 750" (Malik Allah Yar, head of the Kalabagh family). In 1983 they were decimated by an unknown epidemic thought to have been introduced by ticks carried by camels who were allowed into the area (by the Kalabagh family) for controlled fuel wood felling and charcoal burning. As many as 20 dead urial could be found during one day's survey at the height of the epidemic and numbers were estimated to have fallen to 300. Since that time a high proportion of lambs have been reared and the herd seems to have made an astonishingly rapid recovery and to be estimated at well over 700 today as lambing is now in progress (Malik Allah Yar Khan, Pers. Comm., April 12th., 1985).

SHAPU OR HIMALAYAN URIAL (Ovis orientalis vignei)

This subspecies besides being noted for its larger than average size, is distinguished by the rams bearing relatively massive horns, which are of a rather open or short curvature. The chest ruff in this subspecies also tends to be rather short.

Again this is a very widely distributed and scattered population but there have been no systematic or reliable attempts at population estimation. They occur on the lower foothill spurs and valley slopes of the Chitral Valley, as well as Mastuj Valley further north. Westwards, they occur in Gilgit, especially around Yasin, Bunji and up the Hunza Valley. On the east boundary of Pakistan's northern regions, they occur in Baltistan in the Indus Valley and its tributaries, the Shigar and Shyok Valleys.

In Chitral due to unrelenting hunting pressure, its numbers are very low (Mohammed Mumtaz Malik, Conservator Wildlife Government of NWFP, Pers. Comm., April, 1985). The status is more favourable in the upper reaches of the Gilgit Valley and also in the northern regions of the Hunza Valley (Ghulam Rasool, DFO Wildlife, Gilgit Agency, 1984). In Baltistan, due to the greater poverty of the local people, there are fewer firearms and less hunting pressure than in Gilgit, but numbers are considered low when compared with the Himalayan Ixobrychus population (M.N. Bhandara, Governor WWF Pakistan, based upon a visit in June 1984, Pers. Comm.).

At Skardu, the capital of Baltistan there is a huge outcrop of rock standing in the bed of the Indus whose flat "table mountain" top covers some 550 hectares, and a small band of Shapu still survives on this rock despite its proximity to the town and accessibility to humans. Their numbers may well be less than 25 (author), but it is encouraging testimony to the species ability to survive, especially as the available vegetation on this rock is extremely scanty and appears to be comprised mostly of Artemisia maritima and a small succulent compositae. Intelligent guesses of the Baltistan population are between 500 and 600 and of the Gilgit/Hunza population between 700 and 800.

MARCO POLO'S SHEEP (Ovis ammon polii)

This spectacular animal has always attracted attention amongst Pakistan's wildlife enthusiasts, especially amateur hunters. A reserve was created specifically for this sheep in 1974 and called the Khunjerab National Park.

This is on the northeastern border of Hunza where it joins the international boundary with Chinese Sinkiang. The area of suitable and available habitat in the Khunjerab Valley is however very limited (it lies at over 5180 metres in elevation) and there is no permanent population of Marco Polo sheep, but small bands are sighted in the autumn, winter and early summer months. According to Shuja-ul-Islam, Member Governing Council WWF Pakistan, who visited the Khunjerab in July 1984 and saw 2 animals, a local Game Warden Hajijan, had counted a maximum herd of over 70 animals in that region in the early spring of 1984 (Pers. Comm., March 1985).

Unfortunately poaching still occurs, with a recent reliable report involving an army officer serving in the border region who secured two trophy heads. Marco Polo sheep still wander into the Kilik Pass area to the northwest of Khunjerab and as this remote area is outside of the national park, there are reports of continuous poaching in this region also (Major Amanullah Khan, Pers. Comm., April, 1985). There are no estimates of numbers on the Kilik Pass but they are believed to be very low with a single band of 4 or 5 up to one dozen being encountered in one day's survey.

LITERATURE CITED

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