***Dogs, now the top predator in the Upper Himalayas:***

*Dogs are amongst the top predators of livestock in the upper Himalayas, killing more livestock than Snow Leopards. Increased tourism and the ensuing improper waste disposal has increased dog populations.*

A recently published paper in the journal Ambio reveals that free-ranging dogs have become a major predator of livestock in the Upper Himalayas. Chandrima Home, a PhD scholar at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), who studied patterns of livestock killing by feral dogs, found that free-ranging dogs killed more livestock than snow leopards, threatening to undermine conservation efforts that have involved local communities.

**Increased tourism, improper waste-management**

The resident communities of the Trans-Himalayan landscape are agro-pastoralists who grow barley and green peas in summer (April to September) and herd livestock in neighbouring pastures. However, with the Spiti valley becoming an increasingly popular area for adventure tourism, recent years have seen an increase of restaurants and hotels in the area. The absence of a proper waste-management system has led to the accumulation of garbage on roads and along rivers, providing a much-needed resource for the free-ranging dog population. Because of this resource boost, the once small dog population has exploded and become a major threat for livestock (Unlike the transhumant Gaddi and Bakharwal pastoralists, dogs in the Spiti valley are not used for protecting livestock from wild carnivores). Over time, these dogs have spread to several remote villages and high altitude pastures, threatening not only livestock but also other wildlife such the blue sheep, snow leopard, and red fox.

**Chandrima Home says, “Domestic dogs kill more livestock numbers than snow leopards and wolves combined. This is also one of the main reasons why locals no longer maintain herds of sheep and goats. With the decline in smaller bodied livestock, dogs have now started targeting the calves of yaks.”**

Dog attacks have caused high economic losses to people. Although there is an insurance scheme for livestock losses by wild predators by the Nature Conservation Foundation, there is no compensation for livestock losses to dogs.

**Feral dogs cost**
The economic costs of livestock losses by dogs are high. For the year 2013-14, the annual total value of loss reported was Rs 31, 73,000 (almost 46,700 USD). Of this, dog depredation accounted for Rs 11, 91,500 (17522 USD), followed by snow leopard Rs 10, 22,000 (15029 USD), disease Rs 8, 05,500 (11846 USD) and wolves Rs 1, 54,000 (2265 USD). In the last 5 years, there has been a decline in the population of small bodied livestock (sheep and goat) within the landscape. Many villages have stopped keeping small bodied livestock due to increased frequency of depredation by dogs.

Abi Tamim Vanak, A fellow with ATREE and a globally known expert on dog ecology says, "Free-ranging domestic dogs are emerging as a major threat to wildlife with reports of dogs killing large and small mammals, birds and reptiles all across India. In this study, we highlight that dogs can also have serious economic costs for local communities who already face economic hardships due to human-wildlife conflict. In such circumstances, it is possible that local people’s tolerance towards livestock depredation by wildlife may decrease, jeopardising hard fought conservation successes."

The current rules and regulations in India prescribe that the only method for regulating dog populations is through sterilisation. However, sterilisation is unlikely to solve the problem in the short-term, especially since it is likely that a only small proportion of the dog population is becoming feral and may be responsible for most of the attacks. These feral dogs can be seen mainly in the periphery of villages, as well as in the pastures. It is therefore necessary to tackle this issue head on by removing such problem-causing animals to begin with. At the same time, proper waste-disposal strategies and encouraging responsible dog ownership will help reduce the dog population over time and alleviate the incidences of livestock depredation.

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