



Dogs often kill livestock, especially sheep and goats, but can also kill larger livestock such as cattle and horses. The problem can be so acute that farmers have abandoned rearing sheep and goats in parts of the Himalaya. Here a dog is scavenging a dead cow (Subhashini Krishnan)

Canine Catastrophe in the Mountains

Yash Veer Bhatnagar

Estimates put the 'free-ranging' dog population at over 5000 across c. 40,000 km² of Ladakh, and close to 1000 in c. 7000 km² of Spiti. Compare this with native carnivores in the same wildernesses – there are a guesstimated 300–600 snow leopards in Ladakh and about 30–50 in Spiti. Free-ranging dogs are pretty much the top predators in the mountains.

“Stray Dog climbs 23,000 feet Peak in Nepal” was a headline in the global press this spring. A dog had accompanied a climbing expedition to the 7088 m Baruntse peak in Nepal, pretty much on its own!¹ Dogs are common at the Everest Base Camp (c. 5300 m) – they often accompany mountaineers up to Camp II (c. 6400 m). Man’s best friend seems ever ready to accompany man to the ends of the Earth! In fact, Indian mythology talks of a similar stray who accompanied the Pandavas up the Sumeru peak, on their way to heaven. For most people, having such a willing companion on an arduous climb can be a welcome stress buster.

However, in the high Himalaya all is not well. There are dogs everywhere on the landscape—near settlements and far from them and up in high mountains. Estimates put the free-ranging dog population at over 5000 across c. 40,000 km² of Ladakh, and close to 1000 in c. 7000 km² of Spiti. Compare this with native carnivores in the same wildernesses—there are a guesstimated 300–600 snow leopards in Ladakh and about 30–50 in Spiti. Free-ranging dogs are pretty much the top predators in the mountains.

Dogs were probably domesticated from wolves over 15000 years ago; maybe the very first species to be domesticated, even before sheep, goats and cattle. Some genetic studies put the domestication to even as early as 135000 years ago! Dogs are human commensals and spread with humans, even into remote wildernesses. Studies suggest that dog populations grow with human population. When dogs are domesticated and kept by a household they are usually fed and taken

1 More details on <https://blog.usejournal.com/@donwargowsky>

care of. But when they are stray or free-ranging, they mainly rely on human refuse. But being close relatives of the wolf, they can hunt too. This poses a problem for both human livelihoods and for wildlife conservation.

In the Himalaya, mountaineering expeditions, tourism, pilgrimage and security forces spread food to the remotest corners of the mountains due to ill-managed garbage disposal. This means that dogs can reach such areas, and if resources persist, they can remain there. Their populations can explode with seasonal availability of food, but what happens when the food supplies diminish in the lean season, like winter? Hungry dogs beg for food or form packs and kill livestock and wild animals. Moreover, they attack and even kill people, as has happened in parts of the country. Many villages in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, for example, have stopped keeping sheep and goats as many were falling prey to free-ranging dogs, something that never happened due to predation by wild carnivores. There are increasing reports of dogs attacking wild herbivores and ground-nesting birds. They compete with wild predators for the scarce prey and large packs even attack carnivores like the snow leopard. Along with being a reservoir of diseases such as canine distemper, rabies, and parasitic diseases, dogs, especially those that accompany migratory herders from the foothills, can bring in new diseases into the high mountains. There are instances of dogs hybridizing with native wolves, thus contaminating the genetic pool.



'Man's best friend' in its elements in the high mountains (Karma Sonam)

Burgeoning dog populations is thus a severe problem across the Himalaya affecting both, human livelihoods and wildlife conservation.

Agencies such as the forest departments, armed forces and NGOs are trying out various measures to manage the problem. These include addressing the core issue of reducing organic garbage availability. Most scientific studies also suggest humane culling to accompany other measures for the issue to be effectively managed. The key is to use a **combination** of measures so that dogs are

removed from the area using different means — put into sanctuaries; adoption of pups and adults within and outside the region; humane culling; garbage management (improved collection and recycling) so that no extra food remains; and sterilizing animals. Awareness needs to be spread among all stakeholders, including local people, officials, tourists, businesses and armed forces so that they understand the genesis of the problem and avoid encouraging stray animals.

The mountaineering community is an important stakeholder in the Himalaya and can greatly help in reducing the problem by managing their garbage and also engaging and supporting those who work to mitigate the increasing menace from dogs.

About the Author

YASH VEER BHATNAGAR studied the Asiatic ibex for his PhD in Wildlife Sciences in the early 1990s and has continued working in the Indian Himalaya on research, wildlife conservation and management. He works for the Mysuru based Nature Conservation Foundation and the Snow Leopard Trust (Seattle) and is presently advising governments in Himalaya and Central Asia on landscape-level management planning.



Healthy looking dogs enjoying a hearty meal at a garbage dump in Ladakh (Karma Sonam)

Even the apex predator of the high altitudes, the snow leopard, is not spared by packs of free-ranging dogs. There are increasing instances of snow leopards being viciously attacked and evicted from their hard-obtained kills (Karma Sonam)







Dogs compete with local canids - the red fox, sand fox, and Tibetan wolf. Studies suggest that the wolf occurring in higher parts of the Himalaya may be a distinct species or subspecies called the 'Himalayan wolf', but there are increasing instances of wolf-dog hybridization and wolves becoming part of dog packs. This is causing genetic contamination of this rare carnivore (Lauren Hennelly)

A dog-wolf hybrid in Ladakh. They are becoming so frequent that local people now have a name for it - khapshi. They believe that some of the khap shi's are more aggressive and less afraid of people (Narendra Patil)





There are many instances of dogs chasing and even actively hunting mountain wildlife - from wild sheep and goats to marmots, pikas and birds. They are far more abundant than native carnivores and are altering the trophic dynamics of the region (Karma Sonam)



Dogs used to be bound to human settlements but with better-managed garbage in some places and probably rekindled hunting instincts, they can be found far from human habitations now. 'Captures' on camera traps at over 5000 m or far from habitations are common (Kesang Chunit)



Animal Birth Control or ABC programmes involve sterilizing dogs. Studies suggest that if about 80% of the females in a population are sterilized in one go, a reduction in the population may be visible in a few years. Operating females is a more difficult task compared to males (Ajay Bijoor)



HH Gwalang Drukpa Rimpoche has created a facility to remove dogs from villages and keep them in 'sanctuaries' under their 'Live to Rescue' programme. This is a mammoth task and maintaining such facilities is a huge challenge. Here the Drukpa Thukse Rimpoche is seen supervising work at the 'Sanctuary' in Ladakh (Karma Sonam)