



Afghanistan

Wakhan Mission Technical Report



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Executive Summary

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow panhandle of alpine valleys and high mountains that stretches eastward from the province of Badakhshan following the head waters of the Amu Darya River to its sources in the Pamir Mountains. It borders Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east. It is more than 200 km long (east to west) and between 20 km and 60 km broad (north to south), covering a total area of about 10 300 km². This includes the easternmost ranges of the Hindu Kush and the southeastern most ranges of the Greater Pamir range to a point where they join the Karakorums. The corridor was established as an imperial buffer zone in the late 19th century. The Wakhan, including what is known as the Pamir Knot, is an area of unique interest both from the point of view of its environment and biodiversity as well as its human population of settled Wakhi farmers and transhumance herders, the yurt-dwelling Kyrgyz. The Wakhan is divided into three geographical sections-the main Wakhan strip between Ishkeshem and Qala Panja and the Pamir Knot, which is made up of two blocks of high mountains; the Pamir-e-Kalan or Big Pamir; and the Pami-e-Khord or Little Pamir.

This report has been prepared by Mr Anthony Fitzherbert, on contract to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Dr Charudutt Mishra of the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT), who together with Mr Assadullah Khairzad of the Afghan environmental non-government organization Save the Environment of Afghanistan (SEA) undertook this mission to the Wakhan. The mission was commissioned by the United National Environmental Programme (UNEP), as one of five missions visiting a selection of environmentally important locations in Afghanistan with purpose of making an initial post-conflict environmental assessment. Emphasis was placed on visiting the Big Pamir because in the late 1970s that section of the Wakhan had been designated as a National Park and an area of special interest and conservation management, due to its unique wildlife, in particular the famous Marco Polo wild sheep (*Ovis ammon polii*). The area is also home to other mountain ungulates such as Siberian ibex (*Capra ibex sibericus*) and predator species such as the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*), the fox (*Canis vulpes*), and the lynx (*Lynx lynx*).

The mission took place between 19 September and 13 October 2002 (including travel time). During this time, the mission spent three full days in Kabul and three full days in Faizabad, during which time preparations for the field mission were made and both pre-mission and post-mission discussions were held with various stakeholders, including government officials, United Nations agencies, and non-government organizations (NGOs). Time was also devoted to investigating the markets and bazaars where furs and other wildlife products from the region are traded. Fourteen days were spent in the field travelling through Badakhshan, the Wakhan Valley, and in the Pamir Mountains. Twelve days were spent in the Pamir Mountains travelling, where roads exist, by four-wheel-drive vehicle, and where they do not, on foot or by horse, camping and staying with herding and farming families in their camps and villages.

The main reference information for the area and its wildlife was drawn from work carried out in 1970s by Dr R. Petocz and others working under the auspices of the FAO. One of the consultants, Anthony Fitzherbert, was already familiar with the western part of the main Wakhan Corridor, although not with the Pamirs themselves, from previous agricultural missions in 1995 and 2000, and was able to draw on the knowledge gained during those missions. He is also familiar with the Tajikistan Pamir region (Gorno Badakhshan) to the north of the Amy Dariya / Panj / Pamir river and with Pakistan (Chitral and the Northern Areas) to the south of the Wakhan. Inquiries were based on semi-structured informal interviews, discussions, and conversations held with the herders, farmers, and hunters with whom the mission stayed, traveled, and visited in their herding camps and villages. These were backed up by direct observations made in the field. Inquiries and observations not only included wildlife and environmental issues, but also socioeconomic issues, including the herding and agricultural practices and systems of the area visited. Unfortunately, the mission had been not allowed sufficient time to travel as far as the Kyrgyz herding population who inhabit the eastern Pamir Mountains. This omission must be corrected on any future mission, and adequate time allowed.

In the time available, the mission was able to find out a great deal about both the environmental and human situation. The mission was able to make a number of firsthand observations of wildlife including sightings of Marco Polo sheep and ibex as well as finding signs of snow leopard, brown bear, wolf, fox, and other animals. The mission also recorded sightings of the local bird life and exploring the state of the agricultural areas and rangeland. In addition the mission was able to gather an interesting and revealing collection of anecdotes and information relating to wildlife, herding and farming systems, social and human relationships, and human/wildlife conflict as well as distances and times required for travel in this remote area.

All along the routes traveled the mission recorded place names, grid reference data, and altitudes. This information is recorded in detail in this report and its annexes. Most of the time in the Pamirs was spent at between 3 000 and 4 750 metres altitude. This information was submitted to the UN Mapping and Information Unit (AIMS) in Kabul.

In addition, the mission visited local markets and bazaars in Badakhshan and significantly in Kabul, where a growing trade in the skins and furs of a number of endangered species of wild animal is once again developing.

Among the most significant of the mission's findings are:

- The mission identified and recognized a number of problems, pressures, and areas of conflict between the human population and the natural environment including the wildlife.

These include:

1. the threat posed by a reviving trade in the furs and skins of endangered species such as the snow leopard, wolf and the lynx;
 2. the conflict between herding communities and the large predators, primarily the snow leopard and wolves that prey on the domestic herds and flocks; and
 3. competition for grazing between the transhumance and nomadic herders and the wild ungulates, in particular the Marco Polo sheep on certain sections of the range.
- Nonetheless, despite these threats and dangers, the mission concluded that the wildlife situation in Wakhan and the Pamir is far from hopeless. Indeed, the situation, although highly vulnerable, appears to be better than the mission had expected. The area's remoteness from politics and conflict, and even the Soviet occupation itself between 1980 and 1989, have provided some protection to the unique wildlife of the area. We concluded that among the Wakhi population, at least, hunting pressure has been limited, and professional commercial hunting (as opposed to retaliation/conflict killing of fur-bearing predators such as the snow leopard and the wolf) is not taking place in any systematic form. A recent ban on hunting, issued by the government of Hamid Karzai, appears to have been taken seriously, and there has been a reasonably successful collection of lethal armaments, at least among the Wakhi population.
 - Despite the progress made, a more exact knowledge of numbers of various species, their location, and spread requires a longer and more extensive assessment mission than was possible on this occasion. This will require at least two months or more in the field. This should be planned and funded for next summer and should include the full participation of the Afghan government with a strong element of training.
 - The mission concluded that the whole of the Wakhan, including the western 'corridor' and both Big and Little Pamirs, should in future be included in any conservation programme-and not just the Big Pamir. The

whole area has a unique and vulnerable biodiversity, which is broader than merely the population of Marco Polo sheep. The mission was able to confirm the presence of Marco Polo and ibex in the Big Pamir, but reports indicate that the Little Pamir may in fact hold the larger population of Marco Polo, and this is a place where herding pressure may also be increasing and become more intense in the future. From anecdotal evidence it became clear that the western Wakhan Corridor rather than the Pamir area probably has the greatest concentration of snow leopard. It is here that the conflict between herdsmen and the snow leopard is most intense. In the Big Pamir, wolves are the main predators of the domestic stock. The western Wakhan area appears to have a sizeable population of Siberian ibex and urial wild sheep (*Ovis orientalis*), both of which species are under threat elsewhere in Afghanistan and warrant protection. The present hunting ban should be maintained and as far as possible enforced for the time being.

- The human population of the whole Wakhan/Pamir area-both settled Wakhi and nomad Kyrgyz-suffer from a compound of problems including chronic poverty, ill health, lack of education, food insecurity, and opium addiction, arising from the remoteness and harshness of their environment and the lack of resources and facilities. Any environmental conservation programme must incorporate the local population as full participants and beneficiaries. It must fit in as an integral component of a comprehensive community-based programme including health, education, and infrastructure and the development and improvement of agriculture and livestock husbandry.
- Fortunately, plans for long-term community development programmes are already in the process of being put in place in the Wakhan by the Aga Khan Development Network. Any plans for environmental conservation should take advantage of and build on this as well as on the moral and beneficial influence that can be exerted on the local Ismaili population by the Aga Khan himself. At present the United Nations is represented solely by UNICEF, which is involved in primary education and health. Other agencies such as the FAO, UNDP, UNOPS, and others have a very important role to play, bringing with them lessons learned in other parts of Afghanistan.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"When the traveler leaves Badakhshan, he goes twelve days' journey east-north-east up a river valley belonging to the brother of the lord of Badakhshan, where there are towns and homesteads in plenty, peopled by a warlike race of Moslems. After these twelve days he reaches a country called Wakhan of no great size, for it is three days' journey across in every way. The people, who are Moslems, speak a language of their own and are doughty warriors. They have no ruler except one, whom they call 'nona', that is 'count' in our language, and are subject to the lord of Badakhshan. They have wild beasts in plenty and game of all sorts for the chase.

When the traveler leaves this place, he goes three days' journey towards the north-east, through mountains all the time, climbing so high that this is said to be the highest place in the world. And when he is in this high place, he finds a plain between the mountains, with a lake from which flows a very fine river. Here is the best pasturage in the world; for a lean beast grows fat in ten days. Wild game of every sort abounds. There are great quantities of wild sheep of huge size. Their horns grow to as much as six palms in length and are never less than three or four. From these horns the shepherds make bowls from which they feed, and also fences to keep in their flocks. There are also innumerable wolves, which devour many of the wild rams. The horns and bones of the sheep are found in such numbers that men build cairns of them beside the tracks to serve as landmarks to travelers in the snowy season." Marco Polo (1254-1324) from 'The Travels - The Road to Cathay' .

Note: It was interesting to compare these observations made almost 730 years ago by the famous Venetian merchant adventurer, with the present. In certain respects it could act as a passable guide to the Wakhan and Pamir for today. Although the numbers of wild game are sadly diminished their descendants as well as their predators are still happily to be found among the snowy heights and alpine pastures of the 'Bam-e-Dunya' (The Roof of the World). It is the responsibility of this generation to ensure that this is still true for the generations to come. Cairns made up by the local herdsmen from the horns and skulls of ibex and wild sheep killed by wolves still mark the graves of saints and point the rocky way for travelers. For those who still must walk and ride, the distances as described are still uncannily accurate in measurements of time as are the salient points of geography, and as the Soviet forces discovered to their cost, the mountains and valleys of Badakhshan are still inhabited by 'dauntless warriors'.

1.1 Wakhan Corridor

The Hindu Kush/Himalayan mountain system of south Asia includes several mountain ranges, including the Great Himalaya, the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamirs, which extend over 3 500 km and across nine countries (from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east). These four great mountain ranges meet

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