

The Maoist people's war and conservation in Nepal

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ABSTRACT. Civil wars are frequent in lesser-developed nations, wherein is harbored a disproportionate share of the world's biodiversity. These wars have had serious detrimental effects, direct and indirect, on conservation programs. From 2001 to 2005, we conducted site visits, personal interviews, and document searches bearing upon this problem as exemplified by Nepal's ongoing Maoist insurgency. Cases of insurgents usurping full control of several protected areas have come to light, as has a rapid increase in poaching and illicit wildlife trade nation-wide. Staff and infrastructure of conservation agencies and non-governmental organizations have been attacked. The Nepalese situation invites reassessment of traditional "fortresses-and-fines" conservation strategies as well as more modern "community-based" approaches that require local governmental offices to remain functional. Also called into question is the role of military force in the protection of parks and reserves. In times of civil strife, we conclude, robust conservation may most likely be achieved by nongovernmental organizations that are politically neutral and financially independent.

Key words: civil war, conservation programs, Maoist insurgency, Nepal, protected areas

Civil unrest, especially civil war in developing countries, complicates efforts to conserve species and, thus, jeopardizes biodiversity.¹ The 1990s saw more than three times as many ongoing conflicts as the 1950s,^{2, 3} with instability still rife in Asia, Africa and Latin America.^{4, 5, 6} Particularly affected are species-rich rural and wild areas, many with conservation efforts either ongoing under strain or frustrated completely.⁷ War can seriously degrade environments by escalating pressures on natural resources, stoking the fires of violence. People displaced under such circumstances are political *and* environmental refugees,⁸ and neither they nor their governments are likely soon to rank species conservation a high priority.⁹

Among developing countries, Nepal has been at the forefront of conservation for several decades.¹⁰ However, the Maoist People's War has been a major setback

in the past decade and, at this time, problems are worsening.^{11, 12} The insurgency began in 1996, six years after the restoration of multiparty democracy.¹³ There is no single explanatory factor attributed to its cause, but the failure of various democratic governments in place since 1990 to recognize the plurality of Nepali society has served the insurgency. Even after the restoration of democracy, socioeconomic inequalities — evidenced by widespread poverty; caste, ethnic, and gender discrimination; political and social oppression; and official corruption — were prevalent.^{13, 14} The 2001 massacre at Narayanhiti Royal Palace, in which the former Crown Prince allegedly killed many of the Royal Family's inner circle and himself,¹⁵ added to general unrest. The current King, who was crowned after the murder of his older brother in the 2001 massacre, has moved to suppress the insurgency in ways collaterally suppressing civil rights and limiting the

civilian role in government.¹¹ During the past decade, over 12,000 people have died fighting for either the government or the rebellion,¹⁴ and the consequences of war now permeate all spheres of a once peaceful nation.¹²

One of the most obvious impacts has been on the economy. Most development activities have halted in many parts of rural Nepal. The Government has slashed development funds, diverting them to security expenditures. Rebel attacks on hydropower plants, access facilities, communication networks, and development projects have caused substantial economic losses. Economic indicators have plunged; social and cultural life in many regions has been devastated.¹³ Large numbers of people have been fleeing Maoist strongholds in the mountains, moving to larger urban areas and the lowlands (Terai) and, in some cases, leaving the country. Abandonment of agricultural land under Maoist control has led to food deficits in many areas. Moreover, the livelihoods of rural people depend in part on harvesting non-timber forest products, so as the insurgency has spread, many rural people have been deprived of these resources and have found no alternative means of subsistence. They have thus been forced to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, entering a mass migration. Numerous cultural practices have been abandoned because of Maoist injunction, or simply out of fear.¹⁴

Several studies have systematically examined the war's economic consequences,^{12,13,16} but none its conservation consequences, in part because acquisition of relevant data in war-affected areas is difficult but also because conservation is a low priority in dangerous times.⁷ Our analysis is based on a review of published literature, news in the local press, direct observations during field visits to all Terai reserves over the past four years, and discussions with local people and conservation professionals.

The sabotage of conservation

The top-level conservation agency of Nepal is the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation. It has four departments. The Department of Plant Resources is mostly a research agency and does not manage large land resources. As such, its programs have not been directly affected to a great degree by the war (U. R. Sharma, Director General of Plant Resources, personal communication, 2004). The other three departments,

Table 1. The sixteen existing protected areas of Nepal. Shown are their dates of establishment, sizes of core areas, and sizes of buffer zones (where applicable). Asterisks indicate the sizes of proposed buffer zones that have not yet been officially designated. A proposed extension to Bardia National Park (+) will increase its core area by about 550 sq km and its buffer zone by about 345 sq km (see text; data from the DNPWC).

	<i>Year established</i>	<i>Core area (km²)</i>	<i>Buffer zone (km²)</i>
National Parks			
Chitwan	1973	932	750
Bardia +	1976	968 +	328 +
Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest)	1976	1,148	275
Langtang	1976	1,710	420
Rara	1976	106	
Khaptad	1984	225	
Shey-Phoksundo	1984	3,555	1,352
Shivapuri	1984	144	
Makalu-Barun	1991	1,500	830
Wildlife Reserves			
Koshi Tappu	1976	175	173
Sukla Phanta	1976	305	243
Parsa	1984	499	367*
Conservation Areas			
Annapurna	1986	7,629	
Kanchenjunga	1997	2,035	
Manaslu	1998	1,663	
Hunting Reserve			
Dhor Patan	1987	1,325	
Totals		23,919	4,371 (367*)

Source: Authors.

with major landholdings and projects nation-wide, are quite different. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) administers the network of protected areas, the Department of Forests (DoF) manages government forests outside of protected areas (including community forests), and the Department of Soil and Watershed Conservation (DSWC) is charged with watershed management and control of erosion nation-wide. Since the inception of civil strife, these three agencies have been under siege, and tremendous damage to infrastructure has threatened their stability.

The DNPWC manages 16 protected areas of four different categories, and their buffer zones (Table 1), which collectively cover about 18 percent of the country's total area. As of late 2004, Maoist rebels had destroyed 47 physical structures of the DNPWC,¹⁷

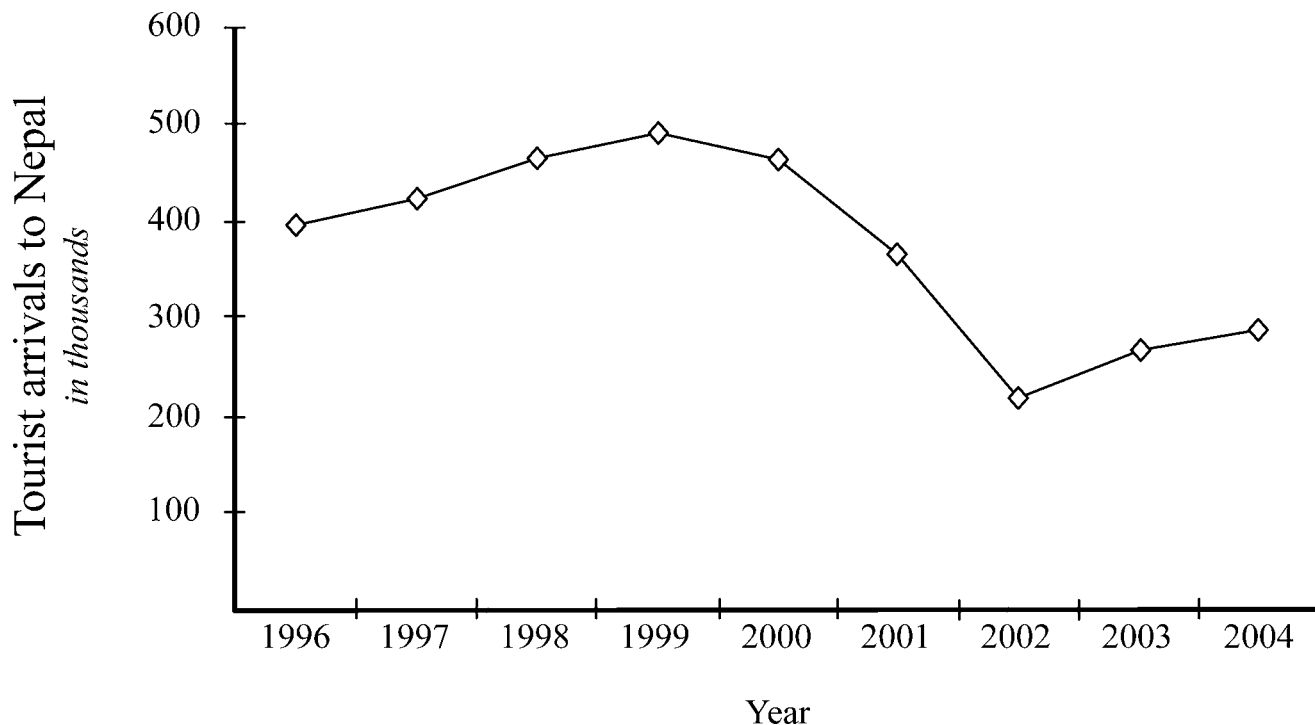


Figure 1. Tourist arrivals to Nepal per year since the beginning of the Maoists insurgency. Source: Nepal Tourism Board, Tourism Resource Center-Downloads. Nepal Tourism Board, Kathmandu, Nepal. from www.welcomenepal.com/arrivalstat.asp (accessed May 20, 2005).

seriously undermining the integrity of park management.¹⁸ Rebels have assumed complete control of two protected areas, Dhor Patan Hunting Reserve and Makalu Barun National Park,^{19, 20} by forcibly evicting staff and taking valuable communications equipment and other property. These areas are important habitats for endangered high-altitude wildlife such as musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*) and snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*).²¹ The conservation status of these areas is now largely unknown, as is the occurrence of resource exploitation in rebel-held territory throughout Nepal. Throughout the world, dedicated conservation staff have lost their lives in times of civil strife.^{1, 22} In Nepal, Maoist rebels killed staff of Royal Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve and Parsa Wildlife Reserve in the Terai in ambushes that were thought to be meant for the Army. Skirmishes between rebels and security force have also been reported in Nepal's two World Heritage Natural Sites: Mount Everest National Park and Royal Chitwan National Park. After these incidents, patrolling inside

parcs and reserves nation-wide diminished greatly, and so has visitation by tourists (Figure 1).

Forests outside the network of protected areas are important for biodiversity conservation because they provide adjunct wildlife habitats and serve as corridors for isolated reserves. Large tracts of forests remain in some places that are legally under the jurisdiction of the

Table 2. Losses of agencies under the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation as a result of attacks by Maoist insurgents.

Departments	District offices	Area offices	Range post	Training centers	Armed security camps	Total
DoF	22	39	217	2	2	282
DNPWC	2	4	13	—	—	19
DSWC	4	—	1	—	—	5
Total	28	43	231	2	2	306

Source: A. Karki and B. Bhattarai, eds., *Whose War? Economic and Socio-Cultural Impacts of Nepal's Maoist-Government Conflict* (Kathmandu, Nepal: NGO Federation of Nepal, 2004).

DoF, which manages these tracts through district and regional offices. Since the advent of the war, the DoF has evidently been near the top of the rebels' target list. As of January 2003, Maoist rebels had destroyed 22 district offices, 39 area offices, 217 range posts, two training centers and two armed security camps (Table 2). One rebel strategy has been to compel the government to withdraw from forested areas, allowing their use for shelter and training.

Conservation agencies in developing countries have chronically been faced with an insufficiency of funds, equipment, and trained staff, and these agencies frequently are unstable institutionally.^{1, 10} The killing of park staff, the damaging of physical infrastructure, and the forcing of residual staff to leave has exacerbated the instability of these agencies in Nepal. Long-term implications for conservation are ominous.

Community-based conservation

After a period of democratization and decentralization begun in the early 1980s,²³ Nepal embarked on community-based conservation (CBC) programs for natural resource management. The CBC approach gained momentum when conservation areas, buffer zones, and community forests were recognized by legislation and subsequently institutionalized. CBC is hailed as a critical approach in areas of political instability¹ because local people express resentment towards strictly protected parks and reserves.²⁴ Although more resilient than the "fortress-and-fines" approach used earlier in Nepal,²⁵ the CBC approach has not proved secure during civil war. Annapurna, Manaslu, and Kanchanjunga — Nepal's three conservation areas — have all been impacted adversely.¹⁸ The southern flank of Annapurna Conservation Area is essentially under rebel control. Of seven field offices, four that lie in southern Annapurna have been bombed, and project staff have deserted.²⁶ Maoist rebels killed three local conservation leaders, each a proponent of Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), and bombed the main ACAP office in Pokhara. ACAP has long been touted worldwide as a model of community-based conservation and development,¹⁰ but its programs have now virtually ceased. Institutional strengthening in the buffer zones of lowland protected areas is also seriously curtailed. Of 29 grassroots institutions surveyed in two buffer zones of the Western Terai, 10 were holding no

regular meetings in 2004, and the others were holding fewer meetings than the Buffer Zone Management Regulation required for them to function fully.²⁷

Another successful model of CBC in Nepal is community forestry. Community forests have restored denuded forests in mountain districts while providing forest products to and revenues for local villagers. Some 12,000 registered Forest User Groups (FUGs) have been managing 850,000 hectares of forests in Nepal.²⁸ The grassroots institutions founded on FUGs have been facing many challenges. Most community forests are in mountain districts that are now under Maoists control, and FUGs must tacitly agree with Maoist rules that are not conservation-friendly. Local press have reported that the rebels were extorting up to 70 percent of the revenue generated by community FUGs in some areas and, in some instances, rebels infiltrated FUG executive committees and earmarked revenues to support the insurgency directly. These activities have severely impaired the sustainability of development and have threatened the survival of FUGs as viable institutions for resource management.

Legal complications arise when FUGs become dysfunctional. When rebellion challenges the legitimacy of the Government in rural areas, FUGs become delegitimized as forest managers because they function in collaboration with, and under the umbrella of, district forest offices.²⁸ The same can be said of conservation and development committees created under Nepal's Conservation Area and Buffer Zone Management Regulations, which function in concert with local offices of the DNPWC.²⁵ Community natural-resources management programs in mountain districts, most of which are now under rebel control, have been harmed especially, as local people often become unwilling to participate.^{5, 29}

Wildlife populations

While some game species have become paradoxically abundant in several war zones,³⁰ as in the buffer between the two Koreas, war's effect on megafauna has generally been detrimental. War has been implicated in sharp losses of elephants and other large ungulates in Uganda,³¹ extirpation of wild ungulate and carnivore populations in Afghanistan,³² and poaching of bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) and gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*) in the

Republic of Congo.³³ Wildlife populations plummeted directly from opportunistic, deliberate and random shooting by rebels, security forces, and poachers and indirectly from landmines and habitat deterioration.

Endangered species such as red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), tiger (*Panthera tigris*), cheer pheasant (*Catreus wallichii*), snow leopard, and musk deer have fallen prey to poachers and rebels in Nepal. There has been a precipitous decline in the blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*) population from 2200 individuals in 2002 to 563 individuals in 2004 in Dhor Patan Hunting Reserve.²⁰ Maoist rebels are shooting these animals for food in some cases, and the activities of other poachers are escalating in the reserve: 53 and 33 traps were recovered in 2002 and 2003, respectively.³⁴ The recent census of one-horned rhinoceros foretells a bleak future for these animals. The population decreased from 544 in 2000 to 372 in 2005 in and around the Royal Chitwan National Park, home to most of Nepal's rhinoceros.³⁵ The death toll of rhinoceros is steadily increasing: 33 died in 2000, 42 in 2001 and 55 in 2002,³⁶ with an average mortality rate of 6.3 percent per year from 2000 to 2005. Tigers are meeting the same fate: six were poached in 2002, eight in 2003.³⁷ Escalation of poaching inside protected areas has been attributed to lax security and inefficiency of anti-poaching units (APUs). The collaborative effort of the DNPWC, domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and local people created APUs in Chitwan and Bardia National Parks in the early 1990s to garner conservation intelligence. Despite hefty donor funding, these units, which had made great strides, have recently failed to curb poaching,³⁵ now a serious threat throughout Nepal.

In the past, elites with licensed arms hunted wildlife in public forests whenever an opportunity arose, depleting wildlife populations outside protected areas. This situation changed when the Maoists seized these arms. Furthermore, when these seizures escalated, the Government ordered all licensed arms to be submitted to security forces. Since hunters lost arms, the frequency of hunting decreased, perhaps accounting for a resurgence of some more common species in public forests. However, conservationists have been skeptical about claims that endangered species have rebounded in rebel-controlled areas. Data on population trends of

wildlife remain sparse, as it is frequently infeasible to undertake research in wildlife habitats under guerrilla control.⁵

The decline of law and regulation

Nepal is one of the few countries in the world to deploy soldiers — the Royal Nepalese Army — for the protection of parks and reserves.¹⁸ These soldiers had been effective before the war;¹⁰ more recently, and especially since 2001, when the Government declared a state of emergency, they have been less effective. Protected areas have seen a 70-percent reduction in guard posts, from 112 down to 34.¹⁷ Patrolling by both army and civilian staff has been reduced in temporal and spatial scales within protected areas, emboldening poachers, smugglers, and trespassers.

Nepal is party to international conservation accords such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Biodiversity, the World Heritage Convention, and the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar). Even in more peaceful times, CITES implementation has been spotty in India and Nepal.³⁸ Implementation of and compliance with these treaties have been hindered by a lack of national implementing legislation.^{39, 40} In recent years, violations have greatly increased.⁴¹

Although Nepal is not a major consumer of wildlife parts, poachers use its territory as a transit point for illegal trade with China and India.⁴² Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, has become a hub for illicit trade in bones, skins, furs, and other body parts of endangered wildlife. There on April 23, 2004, police personnel disguised as consignors arrested a trader with 85 leopard and 38 otter skins.⁴³ He had bought them in India and intended to export them to China. A huge cache of wildlife parts was recovered on March 29, 2004, near the Nepal-Tibet border. Security personnel seized 172 pieces of rhinoceros skin, seven tiger skins, six skins of unidentified cats and 165 pieces of tiger bone.⁴⁴ Security personnel seized 32 tiger, 579 leopard, and 666 otter skins *en route* to Tibet in October 2003.⁴³ The animals named here all represent species listed in the CITES Appendices and are thus trade-regulated, but their skins or bones continue to fetch high prices in black markets, especially in China,⁴⁵ threatening the survival of endangered species throughout Nepal.

With security compromised in Nepal, wildlife trade has expanded throughout the Himalayas. A recent survey in Sariska Tiger Reserve, India, found no living tigers, due to poaching.⁴⁶ His Holiness the Dalai Lama has recently been trying to reduce poaching and illegal wildlife trade by Tibetans in exile in both India and Nepal,⁴¹ appealing through Buddhist teachings of love and compassion for all sentient beings. The activities prosecuted recently in Nepal are thought to be only a tip of an iceberg. Better coordination and cooperation among the three countries would facilitate enforcement of national laws and CITES, but, with civil war in Nepal, initiatives in bilateral and regional conservation coordination — begun in the 1990s — have ceased.⁴⁷ This is also true of the legislation pending, for up to four years, within Nepal to improve implementation of CITES and Ramsar,³⁹ extend Bardia National Park, and declare buffer zones around several other protected areas. With the current situation, enforcement and expansion of international conservation conventions and national conservation law has proven impossible, with myriad negative consequences region-wide.

Astute modern rebels may deploy the rhetoric of biodiversity and conservation.⁴⁸ To date, though, the Maoists in Nepal have not proclaimed an environmental policy. They have seemed guided by short-term interest only. While protecting forests may incidentally serve its interest because forests are indispensable as hideouts,⁵ the insurgency's overall effect on conservation is decidedly negative. In the high Himalayas, Maoist rebels are facilitating the sale of trade-regulated aromatic and medicinal plants to obtain revenues by issuing permits to collect *yarsa gumpa* (*Cordyceps sinensis*), *panch awale* (*Dactylorhiza hatagirea*), and *loth salla* (*Taxus baccata*).²⁶ This practice is thought to be pushing those species towards extirpation in some areas, but, with no on-going research, any such supposition must remain speculative. Maoists collude with poachers and smugglers in this and other forms of prohibited trade because illicit activities are commonplace in the absence of official authority. Notwithstanding several examples of rebel groups helping to conserve forests elsewhere,⁴⁹ no conservation benefit of the Maoist People's War in Nepal is obvious, despite their leaders' rhetorical support for forest conservation.⁴⁷

Some economic and social impacts

Revenues generated within protected areas nationwide for the years 2000/01, 2001/02 and 2002/03 were 1,796,000, 912,000, and 802,000 US dollars, respectively.⁵⁰ Along with this general decline has been a 40- to 60-percent drop in park entry-fee income.¹⁷ Mountain parks such as Langtang, Everest, and Shey Phoksundo are famous for trekking and Terai parks such as Chitwan and Bardia are renowned for wildlife safaris. Since tourist arrivals at the national level have decreased tremendously (Figure 1), these parks also have lost substantial revenue. Tourism is a main funding mechanism for local programs both in conservation areas and buffer zones around national parks and wildlife reserves,²⁵ but this mechanism has become unreliable and in some places, including Annapurna Conservation Area, receipts are now largely extorted by Maoists anyway. Trophy hunting was the main source of revenue in Dhor Patan Hunting Reserve and mountaineering was in Makalu-Barun National Park, but, with these areas under rebel control, nothing is contributed to the central treasury or to local conservation efforts.

Considering the volatile nature of the tourism market, income from ecotourism can now be seen only as complementary, not substitutive, for conservation.⁵¹ The government previously collected substantial revenue through the sale of timber and non-timber forest products from productive forests of the Terai, but these revenues have declined as well. The conservation agency has become chronically under-funded,¹⁰ not just because its own income has diminished but also because government allocations to it contracted when revenue generated by parks and productive forests plunged. One of the strategies used by rebels worldwide is taking control over revenue-generating sources with the intent of bankrupting the state.⁵ Supplementing this strategy, the Maoists in Nepal have been generating revenues from the abuse of natural resources to help fund their own operations, at a direct loss for conservation.

War brings about many social problems that ultimately influence natural resource conservation and management. After 1996, many people who were displaced from mountain districts by the Maoist People's War migrated to the Western Terai.⁴⁷ Large-scale influxes of immigrants increased pressures on forests

and hastened their exploitation. Research elsewhere has shown that plundering resources by rebels compels local people to harvest more aggressively⁵² and, owing to the uncertainty created by disorder and confusion, to discount the value of biodiversity more deeply than they would under normal conditions. Ineluctably, exploitation of endangered plants and animals, either for subsistence or commercial purposes, increases.

Religious traditions may garner support for conservation in some cases; for example, sacred forests thrived in Uganda during civil unrest.⁵³ In many places, people have favorable attitudes towards wildlife despite predation of livestock or damage to crops,⁵⁴ and this is true to an extent in the primarily Hindu and Buddhist populations of Nepal.²⁴ However, religious traditions and cultural harmony may deteriorate when civil strife creates political chaos. In the name of social reform, the Maoists of Nepal outlawed many religious and cultural practices that were conservation-friendly and that previously checked over-exploitation of resources at the local scale.¹⁴

Synthesis and conclusion

A decade of the Maoists People's War is having far-reaching conservation consequences in Nepal. Damage to physical facilities, the takeover of protected areas and forests, and the intimidation and killing of staff by Maoist rebels have seriously destabilized the conservation sector. In the absence of stringent law enforcement, poachers are taking a large toll on many endangered species. The future of the one-horned rhinoceros and the tiger is bleak in Nepal if the current level of poaching remains, after a period — the late 1960s — in which the populations of both had increased by four- to six-fold. Escalating wildlife trade and failing governmental response violate international conservation accords and result in, effectively, no implementation of national wildlife law. The country's dependence on tourism to fund conservation programs also has been deleterious. The conservation agency has long been underfunded, a situation exacerbated when tourist markets suffered from the insurgency. In addition, Maoist rebels have diverted natural resources to support their insurgency.

This experience in Nepal and similar experiences elsewhere make an obvious point. Conservation laws, rules, regulations, and modalities are crafted in periods

of political stability and tacitly assume that stability will be ongoing. But stability in many species-rich regions of the developing world cannot be assumed, nor can conservation simply be set aside and picked up again later, when tempers cool and order returns; instability may not be forever, but extinction is.

The deployment of soldiers in protected areas did not succeed in Nepal because soldiers had to be withdrawn to fight the rebels, leading to what has amounted to a complete breakdown of conservation enforcement throughout the Kingdom. The wisdom of relying on soldiers for conservation enforcement has been raised previously and in different contexts. For example, Heinen and Kattel¹⁰ have pointed out one obvious drawback: military protection units in Nepal absorbed up to 70 percent of the DNPWC budget. Regulations specifically disallowed the use of soldiers in designated conservation areas prior to the insurgency, when many conservation successes were nonetheless documented, as in Annapurna Conservation Area.⁵⁵ The time has long since come to reconsider the army's record and role in the protection of parks and reserves and to institutionalize conservation mechanisms that could succeed in peacetime and then remain successful during periods of instability.

The CBC approach to conservation has been generally more resilient to social change in Nepal than has the fortresses-and-fines approach; this enhanced resilience has been manifested in Community Forestry, Conservation Area, and Buffer Zone Management Regulations until recently. But this approach is not impervious to civil strife in the current situation. Rebels in Nepal have extorted funds from community forest-user groups, killed local conservation area leaders, and bombed offices that supported local people and conservation. In spite of this, many grassroots institutions have survived, albeit with lesser activity, because of local popular support. The Maoists' "anti-imperialist" policies, including the banning of some NGOs, have made it harder for the international conservation community to remain involved.

Nowhere in the world, to our knowledge, has a third party organization collaborated successfully with combatants — rebels, government, or both — to continue conservation work in the midst of civil war. However, in Nepal a small opening to this effect may prove a fruitful area for research. Field offices and projects of government agencies and the quasi-govern-

mental King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation — KMTNC, an NGO with strong ties to the Royal Family — have been targeted by the Maoists but those of independent NGOs such as World Wildlife Fund's Nepal Program have not (S. Nepali, Senior Program Officer, WWF-Nepal Program, personal communication, 2005). In some cases, World Wildlife Fund field staff have had to pay "permit" fees in rebel-controlled areas, but their programs have continued, although at greatly diminished capacities.

In addition, university-led and independently funded field projects such as that which led to this publication have also not been targeted directly. We, for example, were personally encouraged to proceed with our 2004 research on corridor habitat in the Western Terai by the DNPWC though much of the area was notorious as a hotbed for Maoist activities. Although several aspects of our research could not be completed as planned due in part to an Army counter-insurgency deployment in Kailali District, one of three districts within the scope of our project, the study nonetheless led to a good deal of fieldwork in the other two districts and the completion of two master's degrees.^{27,56} In sum, then, independent international NGOs and independently funded research projects (*i.e.*, those with no obvious governmental or Royal ties) have been able to function to some degree.

Following these examples, if local user-group committees, such as those formed under the Community Forestry, Conservation Area, and Buffer Zone Management Regulations in Nepal, could be set up so as to work independently of the DoF or DNPWC, they could perhaps have a greater chance of functioning under a broader set of political circumstances through time. Such would require redrafting of the Regulations; as written currently, they are largely top-down from the standpoint of local people.²⁵ In general, political power in Nepal is still largely centralized notwithstanding 20-plus years of decentralization programs.^{57, 58} Recent actions by the King are moving the country in the opposite direction,¹¹ though this shift may prove to have been temporary.

Nepalese conservation efforts depend on the duration of the present period of uncertainty and on its legacy for the political, social, and economic sectors, as well as for the natural endowment. As a result of concerted conservation policies implemented since 1973, populations of many endangered large mammals and myriad other species increased greatly in Nepal, in spite

of a rapid rise in the human population and concomitant habitat decline in many places outside protected areas.⁴⁷ Snow leopards, after a several-decades absence, once again roam the south slopes of Everest,⁵⁹ and rhinoceros and tigers are still more common than they were in the 1960s in spite of the recent spate of poaching. The current period is thus one of decline but not of utter hopelessness. The problems are intricate and no quick fixes are feasible. Although many conservation achievements of the past three decades have to some extent been undone, the insurgency may also be forcing the design and testing of more robust strategies. Like biodiversity, civil war and instability are common in developing countries; they must be weathered, and with local, national, and international support surely they can be. If so, then Nepal would once again have served the world as a model in conservation programs.

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