

Short Communication

Status of blackbuck in Nepal: an update

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Blackbuck Antelope cervicapra is an antelope species locally known as *Krishnasar*. Once widely distributed in the Terai region, its population crashed drastically during late 1950s and early 1960s due to habitat loss and poaching (DNPWC 2016). It was considered extinct in Nepal in early 1970s, but in 1975 after nine individuals were recorded in Bardia, the government began providing high security to the species.

Blackbuck is categorized as Critically Endangered in Nepal but as Least Concern globally (Jnawali et al. 2011, IUCN SSC ASG 2017). Hunting and commercial poaching, retaliatory killing, degradation of grassland and pasture, foot and mouth disease, inbreeding depression, and predation are the main threats to the species in Nepal (DNPWC 2016).

To preserve its natural population and avoid disease transmission from domesticated ungulates, the Government of Nepal declared an area of 172 hectares in Khairapur, Bardia as the Blackbuck Conservation Area (BCA) in 2009 to preserve the last remaining wild population of the species. As a result of continuous conservation efforts, their population increased gradually to reach 300 individuals in 2013. However, due to the unusually high flooding of Babai river in 2015 the population declined to 248 (ibid.).

Reintroduction of the species to Suklaphanta National Park (SNP) has been planned to ensure another viable wild population in the country. This area was a natural blackbuck habitat till 1960s. Between 2012 and 2015, 42 blackbuck individuals have been translocated to a predator-proof enclosed area of 51 hectares in Hirapur Phanta, within the SNP. The translocation was recommended by several feasibility studies (Khanal et al. 2002). Among the 42 translocated individuals, 28 were brought from Nepalgunj Mini Zoo and Central Zoo, Lalitpur in 2012, and 14 individuals were later brought in July 2015 from BCA to restock the declining population. Between 2012 and 2015, there were 44 births and 47 deaths within the enclosure (DNPWC 2016).

A release to the open space in the national park has been planned once the population reaches at least 100 individuals. Reintroductions of the blackbuck have been attempted twice before, in 1977 and 1987, however the efforts were not successful primarily due to predation and habitat unsuitability (Pradhan et al. 2001). While it is vital to establish a second wild population in the country, it is also important to learn from past experiences of failed reintroductions and use it to devise proper strategy to make the present effort successful.



PHOTO 1: A pair of blackbuck in Suklaphanta National Park.

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Biosketch

BIDHAN ADHIKARY is working as a Research Officer in FON Nepal. He is interested in studying wildlife behaviour and habitat ecology.