



**Far from the guns
and bombs lies
the Wakhan**

Inayat Ali had already done a lot of explaining during his trip last winter to the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, the 200-mile-long valley separating the Pamir Mountains to the north from the Hindu Kush to the south, reaching east like a slender arm toward the steppes of China. It took Ali many days to travel there from Kabul, driving perilous roads and fording rivers in temperatures so cold his car's diesel fuel froze. Sometimes he had to stand back while his driver applied the local remedy of starting a fire under the engine to get it going again. Ali's destination: the narrow strip of land that winds between two walls of craggy mountains, where 42 Wakhi villages cling to the stony valley floor. This is Afghanistan's Shangri-La, far from the guns and bombs that plague much of the country—an area so starkly beautiful that people in the cities sigh with longing when they hear its name.

By Kristin Ohlson

The Wakhi are mostly Ismaili Muslims, followers of the Aga Khan, an Imam who traces his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad's daughter. The Wakhi herd goats, sheep, and yaks, and tend potatoes, wheat, barley, and other crops near their villages. Inayat Ali, the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) field manager for community conservation in Afghanistan, spent weeks huddled in their mud-walled huts, with a generator growling outside and an indoor fire of yak dung providing heat. He showed crowds of men and women informative videos and talked about conservation and ecotourism. He told them that foreign visitors would pay good money to trek, climb, and camp in their remote homeland and to see Marco Polo sheep with their six-foot swirl of horns, ibex, markhor, and saker falcons—perhaps even the elusive snow leopard. And so, protecting this wildlife would be in the Wakhi's best interest.

As part of the ancient Silk Road, the 4,000-mile trade route linking Europe to the Far East, the Wakhan historically attracted many travelers. It is even said that in the thirteenth century, one of the world's most famous explorers, Marco Polo, walked along paths the Wakhi still tread today. Before the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, tourism was Afghanistan's number two source of income. Now, revitalizing tourism could help ease the Wakhi's desperate poverty.

The Wakhi listened with interest. In the spring, the elders promised that they would enlist men from the villages to be trained as field guides and trail cooks for ecotourists. But when Ali returned with four trainers, he had yet more explaining to do. As the 25 men selected by the elders filed into a school that had been turned into a WCS base, they stared at the trainers and then at each other, puzzled and shy. They were unfamiliar with this English word "tourism," but they had heard plenty about "terrorism." The words sounded the same to them. Surely, these strangers didn't want them to become terrorists?

"They had heard President Karzai talking on the radio about 'terrorism' and how it is bad and should be stopped," says Ali, who in his native Pakistan, helped found the community conservation organization Shimshal Nature Trust, which won a 2007 international award for ecological sustainability. "So we had to begin the training by talking about the difference. By the end of the two weeks, they were clear that terrorism is bad, but tourism is good."

Community conservation in the Wakhan—of which ecotourism is one aspect—is part of the new WCS-Afghanistan Biodiversity Conservation Project.

For close to 30 years, conflict has roiled and ravaged Afghanistan, from the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the resistance of the *mujaheddin* ("freedom fighters"), to the civil war that followed the Soviet departure, to the ascendance of the Taliban, to the current instability. Along with everything else, Afghanistan's environment has suffered tremendously. Fifty-two percent of forest cover has been destroyed. Soil erosion is rampant. A flourishing illegal trade also threatens wildlife: Lynxes are killed for their soft belly fur,

which is fashioned into comforters, saker falcons are captured and sold to wealthy hunters who train them to pursue small game, and Persian leopards are stuffed for sale. This abuse has accelerated as foreign troops, development contractors, and even employees of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations)—people who are there to help rebuild the country—load their suitcases with wildlife souvenirs, often ignorant of the impact of their purchases. In some areas, the traditional systems for managing rangelands have been disrupted by the chaos of war, resulting in overgrazing and competition between livestock and wildlife for forage. Eighty percent of Afghanistan's people live in rural surroundings and depend on local natural resources to survive. Conservation is very much a life and death issue.

Save the Environment Afghanistan, a local organization founded in 1993, has done good work, but no international wildlife organization has had a full-time presence in the country in more than 30 years. In 2006, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) invited WCS to be the first. Financed by a \$6.9 million grant and

partnered with the Afghan government, WCS now has 71 staff and consultants working in the country, including 55 Afghan nationals. From its headquarters in Kabul, it directs a three-year project with four objectives: to carry out wildlife surveys to gather baseline data and socioeconomic surveys to assess how Afghans interact with their environment; to help create Afghanistan's first protected areas and write new environmental laws; to build the environmental science skills of Afghans and their organizations; and to promote community conservation.

The mission is exciting, but daunting.

"The great and terrible thing about Afghanistan is that we know almost nothing about the last thirty years," says Alex Dehgan, until recently the WCS country director. "There is no scientific data. The Field Museum [in Chicago] made the only American expedition here in 1965, the Society of Naturalists in Moscow did one in 1940, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization made selected surveys in the 1970s. That's not a lot of coverage. The Smithsonian has only eight specimens from Afghanistan out

of its twenty-four million mammal specimens. That's how underrepresented this place is."

During the first year in the field, WCS surveys turned up 27 species of birds previously unknown in Afghanistan. Survey teams explored the country's wildest and most inaccessible areas, including the Wakhan and Nuristan, the heavily forested area on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush mountains. These are not easy trips. The teams go as far as they can by plane and car, then travel for many weeks by foot, yak, or donkey.

Some areas aren't safe for anyone who wasn't born there. Nuristan, for example, is a region long known for its suspicion of strangers. There WCS searched for local people with interest or expertise in wildlife and trained them to do the surveys. The Nuristani teams include government offi-

Travel in the Wakhan is difficult and often perilous. A bridge, even a handmade one (pages 42–43), is often preferable to the alternative of driving (below), wading, or swimming across swollen, glacier-fed rivers and streams.

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cial, recent graduates in veterinary science, and even hunters skilled in tracking prey. WCS brought them to Kabul for six weeks of training and then turned them loose in one of the city’s parks with their new equipment. The hip transects they used work by attaching one end of a line to a tree or other object and then unspooling and measuring a straight line as the researcher walks away. The team drew stares in the Kabul park. Back in Nuristan, the reaction was far more heated. Villagers demanded to know why their lands were being surrounded with white string.

“The people accused them of circling a mountain to sell it to foreigners,” recalls Kara Stevens with a laugh. Stevens is a WCS training and capacity building manager. “But our teams are very proud to be collecting data in this area.”

Even in the Wakhan, where researchers are welcome, it’s a challenge to identify and count wildlife in their remote habitats. “The Marco Polo sheep run around in wide areas at high altitudes, and it’s hard to get within a kilometer of them,” Dehgan observes. “One thought was to employ Wakhi horsemen to drive the sheep into nets—like a Wild West roundup, but at fourteen thousand feet.”

WCS eventually discarded the idea of roundups and satellite collars, realizing that it was much easier to study the sheep and other large mountain mammals by looking at their feces. Scats tell many stories about the animals’ diets and population structures. They show whether a population has been through a recent genetic bottleneck, when its numbers drop and cause a corresponding decrease in genetic diversity. Scats also yield estimates of population size and migratory patterns.

After WCS researchers determine the baseline population, they can develop solid protection plans. Of course, Marco Polo sheep don’t observe political boundaries. Earlier observations have shown that in the Wakhan, the sheep and other wildlife wander a single ecosystem known as the Pamir Knot, where four mountain ranges converge. The animals wander from Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China. Any plan to protect them would require the cooperation of all four countries. George Schaller, WCS vice president for science and research, recognized this years ago. He studied Marco Polo sheep in Pakistan during the 1970s, in China during the 1980s, and in Afghanistan in 2004. In the 1980s, he proposed the creation of a Transboundary Park where all four countries would manage joint resources in cooperation with local communities. WCS is now taking steps to realize his idea with representatives from each country, focusing on an area in the Pamir that encompasses the royal hunting reserve of Afghanistan’s former king, Muhammad Zahir Shah. This initiative not only bodes well for the wildlife, but for the region’s people.

“The Transboundary Park gives these countries a way to talk to one another,” says Dehgan. “Science provides a common language to people of different religions and cultures. And when you get people together to talk about environmental management and science, you provide an avenue for them to talk about other things, too.”

With the longest horns of any sheep—the world record is 6.2 feet—Marco Polo sheep (opposite) are prized by trophy hunters. These massive animals can weigh more than 300 pounds. Because the sheep range between four countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China—protecting them requires international cooperation and the involvement of local herdsman.



WCS is also working with the Afghan government to set up protected areas. The first of these will probably be Band-e-Amir, which has six brilliant blue lakes separated by white travertine ledges near Bamiyan, where the Taliban defaced ancient Buddhist sculptures despite worldwide outcry. Many Afghan and foreign tourists already visit this area, provisionally identified as a national park in 1973. However, the site has never had any formal legal protection.

To conserve Band-e-Amir and other proposed parks, WCS consultants are assisting the Afghan government in developing stronger protection laws to guide national policy on the environment and give the central government the power to protect it. The laws will also authorize local governments to create and enforce their own guidelines for land use, wildlife protection, and an ecotourism industry. Ultimately, WCS hopes to help establish community conservation committees as a venue for local environmental authority in Bamiyan similar to the conservation committees that are functioning successfully in Pakistan.

Inayat Ali and his team were assigned to the Wakhan not only because they have previous experience with community conservation, but also because they are ethnically Wakhi. Some 12,000 Wakhi live in Afghanistan, on the knife-edge of poverty.

WCS community conservation facilitator Syed Aminuddin (above, on right) discusses issues with community leader Syed Shah Ismael. In Kret, a closing ceremony (opposite) ended a WCS ecotourism workshop in which nominated villagers were trained in guiding, cooking, and English communication skills.

“The people in the Wakhan Corridor often feel hopeless and neglected,” says John Mock, a WCS community conservation project manager who has co-authored several guidebooks to this region with his wife Kimberley O’Neil. “The Wakhi are stereotyped as poor mountain people sitting up there taking opium, so it’s good to see the beginning of a change in attitude. They see Inayat Ali, they see other members of the team. They say to themselves, ‘They are Wakhi, I am Wakhi—could I be like them someday?’”

The Wakhi decorate their shrines, tombs, and prayer houses with horns from Marco Polo sheep, ibex, and urial. When Ali and his team arrived to begin training sessions, they were building upon the local reverence for wildlife and giving the people solid economic reasons to protect these animals and their habitat. “When a tourist comes in, he wants his visit to be joyful, without any problems,” he says. “It’s important that people here learn to manage tourist groups.”



Beyond teaching the guides and cooks everything from educating tourists about the wildlife to selecting campsites to disposing of camp garbage, the team held conservation awareness meetings in the villages. They met with groups of schoolteachers to help them stimulate environmental aware-

ness among the next generation of Wakhi. School attendance in the Wakhan Corridor is among the highest in Afghanistan, so the opportunity to reach young people is great. juniper and artemisia high on the mountains—sometimes a day’s trip away. If the villagers overuse this resource, the shrubs might not regenerate. Then the villagers will lose their source of heat, and the animals that feed on the leaves will lose a source of forage. From this project, students can learn that careful management of natural resources is critical to the survival of people and wildlife.

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This is the heart of community conservation: showing people the linkage between environmental issues and their daily lives. “We want to take environmental education closer to the local society,” says Ali. “If you start discussing global warming or some of the big issues, people in small communities don’t feel the connection. We have to identify the things in their lives that they can relate to. For them, fuel wood is an everyday concern.”

The WCS team’s week in the Wakhan was not entirely solemn. Every night, the ecotourism trainees and other villagers settled the WCS trainers around an open space and took the stage and performed traditional songs and dances. On the last night they put on a skit. The hero was Ali—played by a local man—who came to teach two Wakhi villages about conservation. One village ignored Ali. But the wise village—which listened with an open mind—had an abundance of local wildlife and visitors eager to pay for the chance to see it. A fine denouement, indeed.

The team showed the teachers how to enrich the national school curriculum with local issues. They suggested they bring herdsmen, cultivators, historians, and storytellers into the classroom so the children learn to value their own traditions and culture. They encouraged the teachers to give the children year-long projects that would show them how to evaluate the village’s—and their own family’s—use of natural resources. In one of the projects, the children will track the daily use of fuel wood, which the villagers hack from

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