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As part of a project looking at the history of ‘colonial forestry’ I have been studying forest and land management in India during the period from about 1860 to 1920. The subject is of interest because the forest conservation policies and management practices developed in India at that time later became a template for early forest policies and practices in Australia (where I have worked nearly all of my life as a forester), New Zealand, South Africa and the United States of America.

An unexpected outcome of my research was to find that 19th and early 20th century Indian foresters were also deeply concerned about Indian wildlife, and that in their published writings on this issue can be discerned some of the earliest concepts of professional wildlife management.

The outcome was unexpected because a notable aspect of forestry in India in the 19th century was the widespread love of hunting wild animals, or shikar, amongst officers of the Indian Forest Service. Sometimes this was done in the line of duty, a forester being called out to dispatch a rogue elephant or a man-eating tiger. But hunting was also regarded by many (especially those who had transferred from the Army into the Forest Service) as a sport, a contest between man and beast. And despite his firepower, it was a contest in which 19th century man did not always come out on top.

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1 Foresters of the Raj – stories from Indian and Australian forests by Roger Underwood [In Press]
2 ‘Colonial forestry’ is a term used by forestry historians to describe a system of forest conservation and management which has several key attributes: (i) the passing of a Forests Act to provide a legislative underpinning for
Indeed, *shikar* was encouraged. In his obituary for Harry Hill, the recently departed but much admired Inspector-General of the Indian Forest Department, a former Inspector-General Dietrich Brandis described Hill as not just a fine forester, but a 'great sportsman', by which he meant a great hunter (Brandis, 1903). Brandis then went on to say:

A forester, more than anyone else, must use his eyes and must be able, on the spot, to draw conclusions from what he has observed. The training of a sportsman is an excellent help in his work. It makes life in the forest delightful to him, it induces him not only to visit forests but to live in them. He becomes much [more] familiar with the development of [the forest] than a man who is not a sportsman.

The notion of hunting as a sport goes back centuries, possibly as far back as to times when people no longer had to hunt solely for food. And while the 'sport' is based partly on a hereditary (perhaps genetic) competitive urge to kill or be killed, there is another element, as Brandis observed: the hunt takes the hunter into the forest and the countryside, where the beauty and challenges of nature can also be enjoyed, and where there is time and opportunity to reflect on wider problems and issues.

Hunting wild native animals (other than fish or sometimes ducks) is foreign to Australian foresters. For one thing, most of us these days have been brought up in an era in which wildlife conservation is an objective of forestry, and many of us have been closely involved in wildlife research and conservation programs. For another, Australia’s indigenous wild animals are largely non-threatening and easily killed, making the business wholly unsporting ... although the salt water crocodile of the tropics is an obvious exception.

I also admit that my prejudice against hunting native animals is a contemporary Australian perspective; the attitude among foresters (and the general populace) to hunting is very different in North America and in most European countries. Of course I have no objection to hunting the feral animals that despoil our bushland, especially goats, camels, foxes and rabbits, and I have done so, but none of these offer much of a sporting challenge.
Forester critical of wanton destruction of game and calling for wildlife conservation programs. It was a controversial issue, as the discussion surrounding the snow leopard demonstrates.

I have had an intense interest in this animal since reading *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen many years ago. Matthiessen’s book recounts a 1970s expedition in Nepal and Tibet in which he and a colleague (‘GS’) are conducting field studies into blue sheep – that strange half-goat-half-sheep animal that inhabits the high Himalayas. It is a lyrical and mystical book, made more intriguing by the fact that the snow leopard in the book’s title is an unseen, yet somehow powerful, presence throughout. Matthiessen writes how, one night in camp:

... by firelight, we talk about the snow leopard. Not only is it rare, so says GS, but it is wary and elusive to a magical degree, and so well camouflaged in the places it chooses to lie that one can stare straight at it from yards away and fail to see it. Even those who know the mountains rarely take it by surprise; most sightings have been made by hunters lying still near a wild herd when a snow leopard happened to be stalking ... in years of searching GS has seen but two adults and one cub. (Matthiessen, 1979).

The snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) is a large carnivorous cat found only above 3,000 metres in the rocky mountains of Central Asia. Again turning to Matthiessen:

The typical snow leopard has pale frosty eyes and a coat of pale, misty grey, with black rosettes that are clouded by the depth of the rich fur. An adult rarely weighs more than a hundred pounds or exceeds six feet in length, including the remarkable long tail, thick to the tip ... it kills creatures three times its own size without difficulty ... has enormous paws and ... is capable of terrific leaps. Although the normal prey is the blue sheep it occasionally takes livestock ... [but] no attack on a human being has ever been reported ...

Knowing this, it is no wonder that my eye fell with interest on an article in *The Indian Forester* (Anonymous, 1902) entitled ‘The Snow Leopard’. The article had originally been published in *The Indian Field*, the journal of Indian hunting, and is interesting because of the way it reveals the sentiments and tensions of the time. It had been precipitated by a 1901 announcement by the Indian government that the skin of the snow leopard would henceforth be used as saddlecloth for their Imperial Cadets. This proposal had been picked up in England and was causing a fuss. The anonymous author takes up the argument:
country. The proposition was certainly made at a rather unfortunate time, for during the last year or so the question of game preservation in India has been brought very prominently to the front, and any step which might even appear to make for the reduction of rare animals was sure to be deprecated. The Marquis of Ailesbury, we observe, asked the question in the Lords ... and was informed by Lord Raglan, who spoke for the military authorities, that the discretion of [the Viceroy of India] would not be interfered with. The Marquis had laid stress on the generally accepted view that [the snow leopard] was not only rare, but “practically harmless”.

In his reply Lord Raglan stated [with regard to the rarity] that there are only twenty officers of the Imperial Cadet Corps for whom snow leopard skins will be required, and [with regard to the character of the animal] “that it is an open question, whether these leopards are as harmless as they are supposed to be.”

That the Imperial Government purchased a number of skins which happened to be on the market at the time, and that no snow leopards were killed to supply the demand is not perhaps very germane to the point and if only twenty skins are required from time to time, there is no practical reason for protesting, as that quantity will not cause a demand and create a stimulus to destroy the animal.

The writer then goes on to discuss wider issues in relation to the snow leopard, and in so doing gives us an insight into the thinking behind the hunter’s approach (if I might call it that) as opposed to the conservation approach which was arising at that time:

[The snow leopard] is generally accounted rare, but perhaps it were more accurate to regard him as rarely seen; of wary and also nocturnal habit, he does not lend himself to observation; and it is noteworthy that his name is but seldom mentioned by those sportsmen who record their experiences of Himalayan sport. General Maclntyre, in Hindu Koh, refers to an occasion on which a snow leopard made free with the carcases of burhel that had had to be left out all night, and expresses his annoyance that his shikari had not the sense to leave one of the carcases as a bait, and so deprived him of the
nobody thinks of questioning and that he takes severe toll of the cattle when in summer the hill people drive their flocks and herds high up to feed, also cannot be denied.

A reference to the saddlecloth question in Parliament has drawn a vigorous attack on the character of the animal from Captain W.W. Lee ... Captain Lee is a sportsman who has spent 46 years in this country, and his opinion is obviously entitled to the greatest weight. After condemning the Marquis of Ailesbury’s question as absurd, he pronounces the snow leopard the most pestilent vermin in the whole of the Himalayas, with the possible exception of the wild dog, which, hunting in packs, “is about as bad”. Captain Lee refers the presumed rarity of the beast to the fact that its habitat is usually remote and inaccessible, and that it does not pay the native skin hunter to devote attention to him. He says that owing to the difficulties attending their pursuit “they flourish to their heart’s content on the confines of the snows, and countless numbers of ibex, niarkhor and tahr fall victims to them, as well as any number of domestic sheep and goats belonging to the traders and herdsmen of the hills.” This is a serious indictment, and thoroughly justified. Snow leopards easily exist in considerable numbers in suitable regions without attracting much attention from the chance sportsman who passes through the district on his way to a shooting ground...

... Captain Lee regrets that “there is not the slightest fear of their being extirpated,” a result which he says he should, as an old sportsman, rejoice to witness, and in this we concur. I would count it a blessing were every trooper in India, European and native, ordered to ride on a snow leopard skin saddlecloth with the sole object of reducing their numbers. We give this prominence to Captain Lee’s views as they appear so much at variance with those entertained by certain sportsmen, and because, so far as our knowledge goes, [he] is the first man to publicly stamp the snow leopard as a downright bad character whose misdemeanours would justify his extermination.

It’s easy today to imagine and to mock a Monty Pythonesque caricature of this writer: retired Colonel, apoplectic, whisky and soda to hand, pith helmet and elephant gun nearby, portrait of Queen Victoria on one wall, and a brace of stuffed heads of horned animals on the other.
their operations were described by one forester as ‘butchery’.  

Other problems included unregulated hunting by officialdom, poaching (for ivory and rhino horn) and the fact that native villagers were increasingly acquiring firearms and opening fire on wildlife in the forest nearby, generally with the excuse that they were protecting their crops.  

Although by this time the first hunting regulations had been introduced, the system was chaotic, as the following article (by a forest officer signing himself ‘Dryad’ and published in The Indian Forester in 1902) demonstrates:

It is gratifying to see that the subject [of ‘destruction of game’] has been opened in The Indian Forester. Forest officers are too often looked upon by the general public as jealously guarding the game in their forests and regarding the reserved forests as their own reserves. We can discuss this question between ourselves without fear of awakening any jealousy or calling each other hard names.  

My experience deals chiefly with Bengal and Assam. I quite agree with a previous contributor that licensed guns are not, as a rule, used primarily for the preservation of crops. There may be exceptions where elephants and pigs are plentiful and habitually raid the crops; but as a rule, guns are used essentially for killing game. In the Bengal Duars a large quantity of meat of game is sold at the bazaars in the tea gardens. This game is not killed in the course of watching over the crops. In many cases licenses are issued to persons to protect crops where there is no destructive game at all! Licenses appear to have been issued without any consideration of the merits of each case, and it is a difficult matter to withdraw a license once it has been granted.  

My object in writing is not so much to indicate the manner in which ordinary game is destroyed as to expose the slaughter of special animals inhabiting the Sub-Himalayan tract of Bengal and Assam. I refer principally to the rhinoceros, buffalo and gaur. Every year a shooting party from a neighbouring native state, well equipped with elephants, and with permission to enter the reserved forests, is responsible for much needless slaughter. The game is driven by elephants to guns posted on the runs, and everything, regardless of size, age or trophy, is ruthlessly shot. Many animals escape wounded, to suffer from fly-blown wounds or die a lingering death in some remote haunt. The effect of these annual invasions is very noticeable in the sad deterioration of the number of
in admitting a large party with one or two hundred followers into the reserved forests during the most anxious part of the fire season, is another injustice. Work is unhinged, the establishment has to watch over the movements of the party and followers in addition to carrying on its own work. It is not therefore surprising that the visits of the party almost invariably coincide with our bad fire seasons ...
Protest after protest has been made and the matter referred to in reports, but without the slightest success. Sport must be provided for the wealthy globe-trotters, the forests must endure the risks and the game submitted to pitiless slaughter ... The wealthy and titled...know little or nothing of the game they pursue and seek to destroy ... it is sufficient that they can boast of bagging an animal ...

Dryad had his supporters. Before long the first thoughts on wildlife conservation, as opposed to wildlife hunting, began to appear in The Indian Forester. Although written over a century ago, they have a modern ring to them. A forester signing himself ‘Solid Lead’ was one of the first to publish an article setting out the critical elements of a professional approach to wildlife conservation in India.

First, he said, there must be a systematic inventory which will give foresters actual data on game numbers; this must be accompanied by a requirement for hunters to submit ‘returns’ so that data on the rate of attrition is also collected. Second, he advocated a complete overhaul of the licensing system from an ‘area approach’ (in which every animal in a given patch of forest can be ‘slaughtered’) to a system where licences are given for a specified number of specified animals, taking into account the conservation needs of different species. Next, he called for ‘game sanctuaries’, where no hunting at all would be permitted. These, he believed, needed to be large and well-distributed across the country. Finally, he suggested that the number of permits to hunt should be greatly reduced and that there should be a complete revision of the policy that exempted most classes of civil servants and army officers from having to acquire hunting licences at all.

Except that ‘Solid Lead’ did not mention biophysical or ecological research (including studies in population dynamics) or the need to counter commercial poaching, his prescription could almost be taken up and applied in many countries around the world today (including the regions where snow leopard still roam).
About two years ago I was sitting at a convivial mess besides a gallant Colonel, an ardent and well-known sportsman ... and I have to thank him for a happy phrase: "The fact is, there are some young fellows, now-a-days, who seem to find every place slow, who eke out their time with smoking and drinking, gambling and yawning; and are thankful when their day is over. Wherever I have been placed I have always found my days too short. If I cannot shoot, I fish; if I cannot fish, I shoot; and if I cannot fish or shoot, I ride ..."

The cause of wildlife conservation was taken up in a fierce editorial in the *The Indian Forester* (Anonymous, 1906) concerned with the fate of the Asian lion (*Panthera leo persica*). This species was once widespread in southern and north-western India, but was on the verge of extinction by 1900. The editorial was written in response to a report in a local newspaper of a group of 'sportsmen' from England led by Lord Hawke who mowed down a lioness and her cubs from a *machan*. The editor is scathing in his criticism of this story, deploring the use of the term 'sportsmen' (he refers to them as 'butchers') and calls on the Indian government to put an end to the hunting of this species.

Poignantly, in about 1919, another element entered the scene, again reflected in contributions to the columns of *The Indian Forester*. This was a significant revulsion to hunting as a sport amongst the staff of the Indian Forest Service. At first I was at a loss to understand the passion underlying these views. Then the penny dropped. A great many foresters from India were recruited into the armed services, or rejoined their regiments to fight on the Western Front during World War I. Those that returned to India after the war had experienced years of unendurable carnage. Killing anything no longer had any attraction. The soldiers returning from World War I became the most active supporters of wildlife conservation in India.

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5. Indeed, the Army encouraged officers to hunt, as it was regarded as a good preparation for battle. It also helped to stave off the boredom from which many officers suffered.

6. *Machan*: a specially constructed hide or platform in a tree from which animals could be shot without risk of the shooter being attacked by the prey (although safety from counter-attack by a leopard was not guaranteed).
Perhaps the best example of this was the forester Frederick Champion who, returning to India in 1919 after Army service, was appointed a Deputy Conservator of Forests in the Indian Forest Service. Champion became a passionate spokesman for the protection of Indian wildlife and their habitats, and a powerful, outspoken critic of hunting for sport. His position was that the Indian Forest Service could and should come the leading agency for wildlife protection in India. He abhorred killing, and never carried a rifle. Although he is scarcely known outside India today, Champion was one of the world’s pioneer wildlife conservationists, and he took this stance at a time in the history of the British Raj when it was highly unfashionable.

Alas, all of this came to little. It was not until 1935 that India established its first protected areas and only in 1972 was the first Wildlife Protection Act enacted. In the meantime Champion and his colleagues had mostly fought a losing battle. Sport was one factor. Hunting was promoted during the Raj not only as an aristocratic pursuit, but as a source of common interest between Indian noblemen and British gentlemen. The other reality was the unstoppable pressure exerted on forest land and wildlife habitat by the immense growth in India’s population and the demand for cropping and grazing land, fodder and fuel. Wildlife conservation had a low priority over the bulk of rural India for most of the 20th century.

But not all has been lost. I watched a television documentary on the snow leopard recently. The animals survive in the high Himalayas to this day, probably numbering between five and six thousand, and they are subject to detailed scientific study and an internationally-coordinated conservation program. Nevertheless they are listed as endangered, and they face the same threats they have always faced: reprisal killings by the local populace whose cattle the leopards take, and organised criminal poaching for their skins. Most of the latter emanated from the former republics of the USSR, explaining why a dramatic decline in their numbers occurred in the 1990s. Ironically, this was exactly a century after the intrepid Captain Lee called for their ‘extirpation’, and when the first calls for wildlife conservation from the foresters of British India were beginning to be heard.

There is a possibility that snow leopard numbers are now increasing, but they are difficult animals to spot (to coin a phrase) and count. If so, this would be a remarkable outcome considering the devastating decline in nearly every species of wild animal in the rest of India over the last five or six decades. And it would be a good thing; surely the snow leopard must be one of the world’s most beautiful animals.

‘AWP’ (1880): *Canoeing on the Western Ghats*. The Indian Forester Volume V (4) pp 492-515

Brandis, Dietrich (1903): *Obituary for Harry Hill*. The Indian Forester Volume XXIX (8) pp 309-312

‘Dryad’ (1901): *Destruction of game*. The Indian Forester Volume XXVII, pp 549-550


‘Solid Lead’ ((1901): *Destruction of game in the Central Provinces*. The Indian Forester Volume (11), pp 544-549