

Assessment of unlawful activities in the protected areas during the covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

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Abstract

Almost half of the tourists entering Nepal visit protected areas. Visiting the protected areas has been observed to increase gradually over the last decade. The tourism sector was heavily crushed because of the pandemic lockdown. During the lockdown, online media published stories about increasing wildlife poaching and trafficking throughout the world. Thus, this study is aimed at examining wildlife associated with unlawful activity during Nepal's COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. For this daily, national newspapers as well as secondary literature available on online portals were assessed and analyzed systematically. During the two months of April and May, national newspapers reported 12 cases of illegal activities in and around the protected areas, demonstrating that there was a lot of pressure on wildlife authorities. The result also demonstrated that an uncertain lockdown forced many people dependent on forest entrepreneurship to leave their occupations and businesses and engage in other activities. This analysis recommends relief allowances and alternative job opportunities need to be created for the people dependent on forest enterprises. Continuous patrolling and security provision should be enforced during the lockdown phases for all protected areas to curb illegal activities.

Keywords: Corona virus, National parks, Illegal activities, Alternative jobs, Tourists.

Introduction

In the first quarter of the 21st century only, several viral diseases such as SARS-CoV from 2002 to 2003; MERS-CoV in 2012 and Ebola in 2013-2016 have killed many people [1]. These viral diseases have evolved and killed many people in the past centuries too. Most of them were epidemics and a few were pandemics, like the Spanish flu. A similar case occurred in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China causing reparatory illness which was later identified as a novel coronavirus disease in December, 2019 [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared this disease as a "COVID-19" in February 2020. The global pandemic spread to Nepal after the first case was confirmed in Kathmandu on January 23, 2020 [3]. On 30th January 2020, it was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by WHO. It was declared a pandemic as the countries it affected reached 114 with more than 118000 affected cases and the deaths crossing 4000 on March 11, 2020. By May 28th 2021, 220 countries and territories were affected and more than 169691118 positive cases and 3526708 deaths were recorded. 70 million displaced people due to COVID-19. Several wildlife incidents and illegal deeds news about wildlife and Nepal's protected areas were broadcast through national and international newspapers and online media during this period.

At present, there are 20 protected areas in Nepal occupying 23.39% of the land area of Nepal (DNPWC 2018). All the protected areas of Nepal have their own peculiar features and attractions. For example, Chitwan National Park (CNP) is the oldest protected area of Nepal established in 1973 that harbors several endangered wild animals, including one-horned rhinoceros. CNP is one of the popular destinations for tourists in Nepal and has been declared as a world heritage site in 1984. Another protected area declared as a world heritage site is Sagarmatha National Park in 1979. The protected areas are one of the popular destinations and attractions for visitors from all around the world [4]. Protected area based tourism has played a significant role in the national and local economy of the country as well as the livelihood of local people [5]. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, people are locked down in their homes and thus many parks and protected areas do not have visitors at the moment. On the other hand, local communities living nearby the protected areas lost their jobs who were directly and indirectly involved in tourism [6]. Likewise, small businesses like selling tourist products were closed, resulting in the high pressure of local people in the protected areas, which may lead to an increase in illegal activities. Thus, in this study, we tried to collect information about illegal cases that occurred during the lockdown period in the protected areas of Nepal.

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Materials and Methods

A systemic review of published newspapers was conducted during the lockdown time to examine wildlife-related unlawful activities. This study is simply designed on the basis of a secondary literature evaluation of Nepalese national media and data from web portals [7]. The information gathered was displayed on an (Table 1).

Results and Discussion

In Southeast Asia, in Cambodia, three giant ibises which accounted for up to 2% of the world's population drank poison thought to have been set up by poachers, who have become more active in Southeast Asia during the lockdown. Similarly, in Cambodia, 100 painted stork chicks were killed by poachers in this pandemic lockdown period. They also hunted jungle cats during this lockdown. Similarly, in South Asia, the largest bird called giant ibis, which is a critically endangered bird, was poisoned. On May 29, 2020, five elephants were killed in Ethiopia's Mago National Park, and all ivories were stolen during the lockdown. Likewise, in northwest Columbia of South America, poachers have killed five jaguars, one puma, and one ocelot during this lockdown. BBC reporters said in India illegal hunting and tiger poaching is increasing during this pandemic lockdown period. They have used snares and electric wire to trap wild animals. Three national parks of Rwanda, Virunga National park of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kruger national park of South Africa. There is also a major concern that the economy and unemployment level will sharply rise and pressure will be high in the protected areas. Poachers took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and began killing endangered wildlife in African rural villages. In Africa, the black horns, a critically endangered species, are the major target of poachers due to their horns. Recently, at least nine black horned rhinos were killed in South Africa, and six of them have been hunted in Botswana since this pandemic lockdown. All the poaching took place in what were previously tourist areas that were safe for animals to roam [8].

The breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused uncertainty and spillover effects in all industries, and the lingering crisis in worldwide tourism is a major concern

[9]. The tourism sector, a significant backbone of Nepal's revenue creation with tremendous potential, is hardly touched by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that interrupted Visit Nepal Year 2020 with a theme, a lifetime experience. This outstanding program is also a national development strategy in Nepal's tourism history to attract roughly 2 million tourists from all over the world [7]. Almost half of the tourists arriving in Nepal visit protected areas [10]. Income from the tourism industry is vital for many protected areas of Nepal, especially Chitwan National park, Sagarmatha National Park and Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) and local people surrounding these protected areas. But now many people working in the tourism industry are being laid off because of the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown.

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, illegal activities increased in the world as protected areas were free from tourists and the number of security guards was also limited due to the economic slowdown. On the other hand, local people have created pressure on protected areas as they lost their jobs and small-scale businesses based on tourism. As a result, the numbers of wildlife-related incidents are increasing day by day in various parts of the world. In Nepal, the first lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic started on 24th March 2020 and ended on 21st July 2020. During the lock down period, several wildlife related incidents and illegal deeds were broadcast through national newspapers and online media. We were able to assess 12 cases. On May 2nd, 2020, a Musk deer was snared and killed. On May 26th, 2020, Yarshaghuma was a smuggler, On May 8th, 2020, there was a counter fight between smugglers and park staff where 1 smuggler died during the encounter. One smuggler was arrested with a gun. On the same day, 22 trees were felled in the buffer zone of Bardia National Park. Similarly, 22 people were arrested, 1 boat seized, 3 gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) killed on 5th April 2020. Likewise, on April 21, 2020, 20 timber smugglers/ grass cutters and four protected frog (Paha) capturers were apprehended. The details of time and incidents covered by newspapers/channels are presented in Annex 1. Like Nepal, the illegal hunting of tigers and different species of deer is increasing day by day by poachers during the lockdown situation in India (QDB 2020).

Table 1. Illegal activities/wildlife crimes during lockdown period in Protected Areas of Nepal.

S.N	Name and Physiological region of Protected Areas	Illegal Activities/Wildlife Crimes	Months and Year of Occurrence	Source Newspaper
1	Shey Phoksundo NP	Yarshagumba	6 th May 2020	Annapurna Post
2	Parsa NP	1 smuggler died 1 arrested, gun firing against Park staff	8 th May 2020	Himal Khabar
3	Bardiya NP	18 timber smuggler and 10 wildlife poacher arrested	5 th April 2020	Kantipur
4	Bufferzone of Banke NP	5 illegal timber smuggler, with excavator, tractor and 100cft timber	5 th April 2020	Kantipur
5	Chitwan NP	22 persons arrested, 1 boat seized, 3 gharial (<i>Gavialis gangeticus</i>) killed	5 th April 2020	Kantipur
6	Shuklaphanta NP	4 timber smuggler and 10 illegal fishers arrested	5 th April 2020	Kantipur
7	Langtang NP	20 timber smuggler/grass cutter and 4 illegal frog (Paha) capturer arrested	21 st April 2020	Naya Patrika
8	Sagarmatha NP	Musk deer snared and killed	2 nd May 2020	Nature Khabar
9	Bardia NP	22 trees felled in Bufferzone	8 th May, 2020	Ujyalo online
10	Shey Phoksundo NP	22 guns with 3 skins of ghorals caught	23 rd may 2020	(NPN, 23 May 2020).

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Conclusion

Because of the uncertain lockdown, many people lost jobs and business. As a result, conservation of valuable species and protected areas around the world has been hampered. In Nepal, twelve cases related to wildlife and unlawful activities like the killing of wild animals, illegal felling of trees, timber smuggling and other wildlife and NTFPs related crime incidents were recorded during the two-month period. Therefore, to minimize the incidents, alternative job opportunities or compensation should be given to the local people. And a special task force should be used to protect the valuable species of the protected areas during uncertain lockdown with proper coordination and cooperation with local people.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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