

Nepal Observer

An internet journal irregularly published by Nepal Research
Issue 52, September 22, 2018

ISSN 2626-2924

Humans and animals in Solukhumbu¹

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The northern part of Solukhumbu is a natural habitat for numerous wild animals such as black bears, leopards, snow leopards, monkeys (Langurs, rhesus monkeys), red deer, musk deer, wolves, blue sheep, red panda, red fox, wild boars, wild goats (Tahr), skunks, martens and snakes. Encounters between them and humans have always been part of everyday life. With the ever-increasing presence of humans, the habitat of wild animals is becoming increasingly narrower. Climate change is also likely to play a role in the growing number of clashes between humans and animals in recent years.



A leopard at night (source: The Himalayan Times, 19 May 2018)

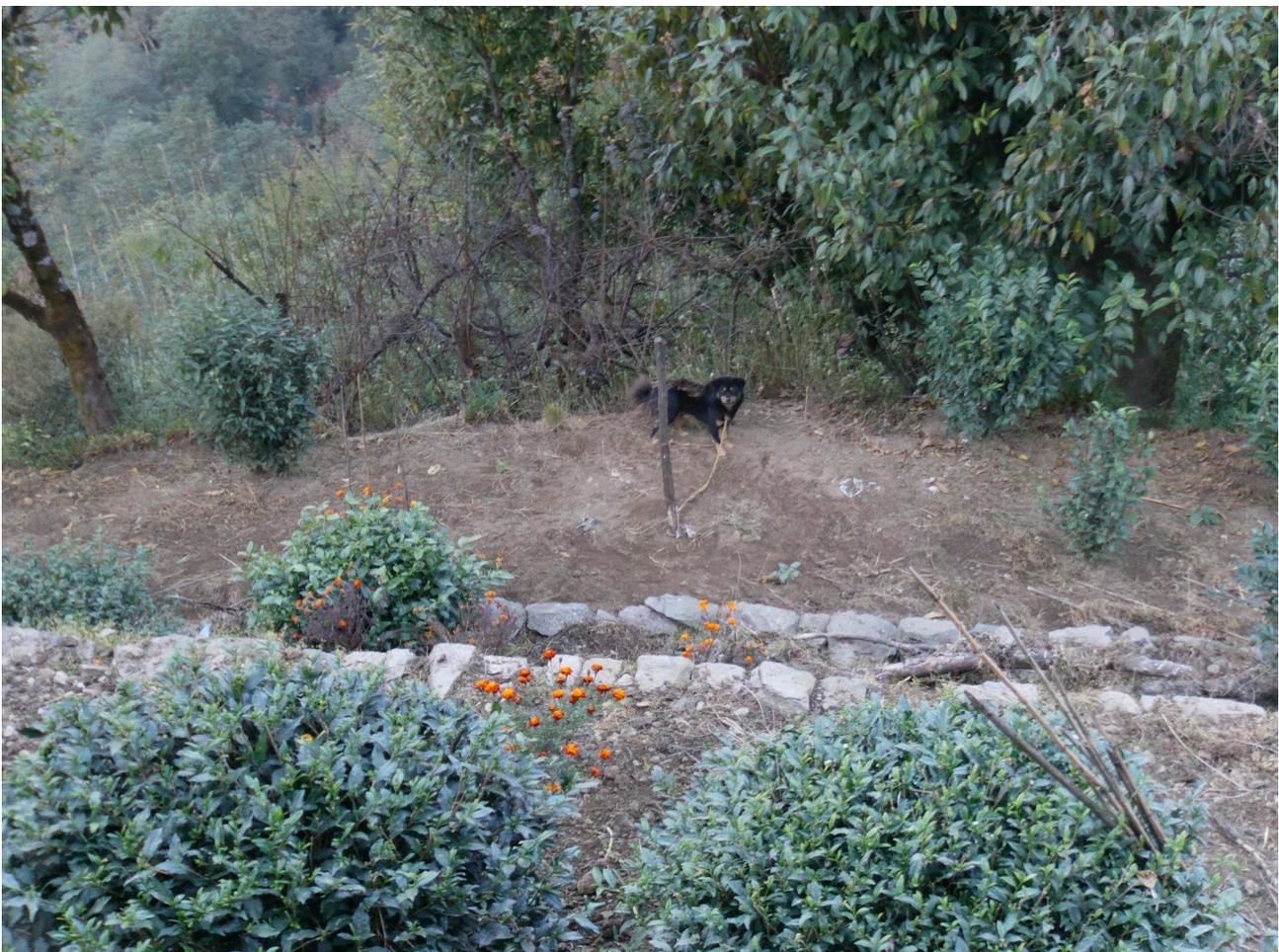
¹ A German version of this article is going to be published in nepal-i 118, Journal of the Nepal-German Friendship Association, in October 2018

One knows such problems from the Nepalese Tarai, where in particular clashes between wild elephants and humans are reported more and more frequently since years. But also in the high mountains, there have been earlier encounters with larger mammals, which were not always harmless for humans.

Agricultural damage

Damage to the fields caused by wild animals is perhaps the most harmless variant, but it can still mean great economic losses for the families affected. Very often red deer, monkeys and especially bears are responsible. The latter are mainly targeting the maize fields. They do a lot of work during their plundering and often leave completely devastated fields behind. For this reason, many families have cultivated maize less and less in recent years, although a few decades ago this was still the most important crop alongside potatoes. Squirrels are also considered to be damaging, but the damage they cause is somewhat modest, as they only nibble on the cobs.

Potato fields are also plundered. Here the damage is caused by porcupines and monkeys, in higher areas also by wild pigs. Of course, the bears also go to barley and wheat fields. Chamji Sherpa, a widow, told us that porcupines had come and devastated her entire potato field.



A dog of Dawa, tied to a pole near the house

In the past, children were often sent to the fields at night to chase the animals away. Thanks to the more or less regular school attendance of the children, this option is no longer an issue today. The expulsion of the animals is also not a permanent solution, since the wild animals then move to neighbouring villages, where they are of course unwelcome as well.

Endangering people and pets

Attempts to chase away the wild animals are not harmless for humans either. As dusk falls, large animals such as black bears and leopards approach the fields and human settlements. So far, there are no statistical surveys as to whether the number of these animals in Solukhumbu has increased or whether only the natural space available to them has become smaller. What is certain is that the villages have grown in recent decades and that the arable land has been extended in this context.



Free-running chickens in the garden

Bears are becoming increasingly common in the immediate vicinity of villages, especially when maize is gradually ripening in the fields. These bears also often become a danger to humans. Recently, Nyima Sherpa was alone when he was surprised by a bear while collecting green fodder. He probably wouldn't have had a chance to escape if a second bear hadn't appeared. While the two bears were fighting, workers from a nearby construction site came to Nyima's aid and brought him to safety.

The leopards are attracted to the settlements as carnivores, because there are numerous livestock and domestic animals, which are a welcome source of food for them. Dogs and goats are particularly endangered. But it also happens that leopards tear cows, yaks and even horses. It is not uncommon for dogs to be tied up outside at night, which makes it easier for predators to access them. If the dogs strike at night, it would actually be time to bring them into the house. Lately two dogs of my brother Dawa have been torn by leopards. In one case only the skull of the dog was hanging on the chain the next day. Not even the remains of the second dog were found.

Chickens are also endangered, of course. Since they are often let run freely beside the houses, they attract foxes, martens and skunks. Larger raptors are also interested. Pemba Sherpa reported that a cock had disappeared. Therefore he sent his dog on a search. After a short time the dog returned only one wing of the cock.