

Position of WWF Mongolia Program Office on current situation of Argali hunting and conservation in Mongolia

Since wildlife is a part of state property in Mongolia, only the relevant authorized governmental organizations make decisions on the proper exploitation and conservation. Apart from governmental organizations, some other non-governmental organizations and international agencies devote their efforts to the study and conservation of the rare species.

In 2000 the WWF Altai Sayan project, in cooperation with the Ministry of Nature and Environment (MNE) and the “Argali” research center, organized a national seminar on Strategic Planning for Conservation of Mongolian Argali Sheep. It was the first effort to assess the current status of the conservation and proper exploitation of the species and define future objectives. The inconsistent survey results were one of the critical issues during the seminar and as a result of it the MNE organized national census on Argali in 2001 and informed that Mongolia has 13 000 to 15 000 Argali.

In 1967 foreign trophy hunters began to hunt this species in Mongolia and launched the proper exploitation of the species in the country. Since then approximately 2000 Argali and more than 10 000 Ibex have been hunted by foreign trophy hunters, generating certain amounts of income for the state budget and for hunting companies in the country.

However, the issuance of licenses to trophy hunters and harvesting management are the same as they were during the former socialist period and lack of mechanisms to increase the local people’s conservation interests, especially in case of Argali. Therefore, we think that the current status should be changed and updated immediately.

Due to lack of standardized survey methodologies and thus a lack of reliable, updated information on the exploitation of the species, there are difficulties regarding the treatment and comparison of compiled survey data and results and problems with the data entry into the Central Database.

For instance, “unreliable data and facts are given in the assessment of the Argali resources; therefore it is impossible to establish the quota for the species based upon unreliable data of the population resource. There is also insufficient basic ecological, biological, and hunting information / data. The collection and use of basic ecological information, the prerequisite for proper hunting management, has not been sufficiently defined.

It can be said that there are almost no policies or legal provisions on the proper use and management of wildlife for aimag and sum authorities. There is

not enough understanding or encouragement of the proper use of natural resources among local people” –according to a recent report by a Consultant who developed Community Based Wildlife Management (CBWM) in the Altai Sayan Ecoregion of Mongolia supported by the WWF and GEF.

Wild species that attract foreign trophy hunters are mostly “rare” species, therefore, their exploitation without any proper conservation management can result in rapid decrease in population resources, further threatening with extinction.

The current improper exploitation of the Argali Sheep has resulted in population deterioration.

Carefully studying the present status of the Argali Sheep harvesting system we think that the following issues should be emphasized:

First of all, the current conservation principles of the Argali Sheep should be changed.

In Mongolia, the resource of the Argali sheep was indicated as a “rare” by the Government resolution (2001/264) and it is listed as threatened in the Mongolian Red book of threatened and endangered species and included in Appendix II of the CITES. It shows that the people should take appropriate stable measures and implement it as policy head toward to provide the population with optimal habitats. Although some parts of distribution areas of the species have been taken under state and local protection, there is still a lack of opportunities to widely carry out conservation activities for the species because of insufficient funds for the management.

The current conservation system, where a few rangers are hired and methods of protection are outdated, is really inadequate for the recent management and cannot prevent the Argali population from being deteriorated. Evidence of this is in the rapid decrease in numbers and change of habitats of the species.

Therefore, one of the best methods and ways to protect the species might be the development of a mechanism that could increase local people’s interests in protecting of Argali Sheep, or, in other words, to offer them sustainable exploitation of the species.

In this case the concept of “user can be a protector” could come true.

The Argali conservation management should be developed and carried out under the leadership/ guidance of the government and the Ministry of Nature and Environment. Wildlife conservation and sustainable exploitation should not be only words in legal provisions but should be actively implemented.

It needs to be improved the regulation and coordination capabilities of the legislative acts relevant to the Argali Sheep conservation and exploitation.

Democratic legislative acts consistent with the Constitution need to be developed that define the system of responsibility, on what basis and where trophy hunting licenses of the species are issued, and what rights and obligations trophy hunters have. In order to achieve this objective some current laws need to be amended and updated, and some new regulations should be developed. Some of the existing regulations are not precisely followed and some of them are

even contradictory to legal provisions. The exploitation and protection of wildlife in all different forms should be regulated by hunting management (this is regarded as a main part of species management), something that has currently been ignored; it is clear that hunting licenses are issued illegally.

Foreign sport hunters are allowed to hunt under special payment and permit. For the regulation of this matter has been issued resolution (2001/249) and was ratified by the Minister of the MNE. In issuing the permit for argali hunting to mediating economical entities a principle to issue it only to those dealing with tourism activities is being adhered and tourism license, foreign relation and experience to run tourism business should be considered as the main criteria to issue the permit.

The tourism is mainly eco-tourism or ecologically friendly, just "sightseeing" type. But the Argali sheep plays very important role in mountainous ecosystem so the "deliberately killing from them" is an exploitation type affecting the population. Therefore, the hunting should be dealt by the specialized hunting organizations, instead of the tourism entities.

Trophy hunting management must cover both the species and the land; this should be taken into account when laws and regulations are formed. The best wildlife management is well-developed land management. The current rule, which causes environmentally unfriendly exploitation of wildlife species, is read "if the hunter cannot hunt any species in hunting areas, hunt elsewhere the species found." This should be converted as soon as possible to "Do not look for any species to hunt out of the permitted areas if the hunter cannot find any within the permitted areas." Specifically the hunters should follow the latter rule.

Hunting licenses should not be issued to the tourist companies, but to the certified hunting companies that are entitled to conduct hunting within certain region(s), and simultaneously carry out conservation activities for wildlife within the region(s). In other words, licenses should be issued only to the hunting areas or region(s) where were done and conducted proper harvesting management, not to the companies in the city.

To date, the state administrative central organization insufficiently carries out activities for reducing adverse impacts on species and their resources, distributions, and habitats, only considering them at policy level.

Due to weak monitoring processes and increased direct and indirect human impacts on resources, distributions, and habitats of Argali Sheep in Mongolia, the population of the species has deteriorated and changes to their habitat has occurred.

For instance, Bayan-Olgii, Bayankhongor, Govi-Altai and Uvs aimags were once widely populated by Argali Sheep. Now, regrettably, the species is seen only in a few numbers in some places.

Assessments of Argali resources in Mongolia were conducted in 1975, 1986, and 2001. According to these assessments there was a 72.0 % decrease in Argali resources from 1975 to 2001 and a 76.6 % decrease from 1986 to 2001.

If the exploitation of the species without proper management is continued in the future, not only the herd structure but also the reproductive capacity of herds will be adversely affected. As a result, the number of big horn rams will decline and the best reproductive genes will be threatened with extinction.

Any activities relevant to the issuance of the harvesting licenses and exploitation of wildlife should be carried out and performed with the scientific basis and within the legal framework.

The Mongolian Law on Environmental Protection (1995) points out that it is necessary to use scientific research to guide the proper use and protection of natural resources, to make apparent decisions and carry out activities, and to ensure environmental balances through ecologically sound economic development.

However, the current issuance of licenses for caprinae hunting does not follow the legal statement above.

The government establishes the Argali hunting quota based on the recommendation of the MNE. Regardless of the decline of the species, the government intends to pursue a plan to earn income from Argali hunting. For instance, the quota of this year is over scientific organization's recommendation.

The justification for the establishment of Argali hunting quotas should be based on the harvesting management report, not on the species resource assessment. This current policy contradicts the Hunting Law. Hunting management is able to give a more scientific recommendation on how to use or protect wildlife. The resource assessment only shows the statistics on the current statement of the population, disregarding many factors like the size of the population in the past.

If Argali are harvested only according to the "quota established at the top" (to meet the hunting market demand in the target area) without considering the reproduction capacity or the resources of the population, it will not only damage the Argali population but also negatively effect trophy hunters who are legally licensed. Because of over hunting and lack of harvesting management, trophy hunter(s) sometimes have difficulties finding Argali with horns of big enough size.

It is appropriate that hunting should be done within certain area(s) and quotas for hunting and use of species should be based upon statistics from harvesting management reports and recommendations from the area(s).

Any kind of business protects own investment. But the current harvesting system not enables to have the interest and implement it. Once there are great possibilities for anyone to make hunting in investor's area, it is clearly understandable that nobody has an interest to make investment in order to protect the animal habitat. However, investment by harvesting management can be appropriate when the target area is under one's responsibility and monitoring.

Rams are sold for the high prices that would cover all expenditures related to their conservation and restoration, as well as costs occurred during the harvest and the costs of planning and implementing conservation management. Unfortunately, this possibility is still not used properly. It is not going beyond the private benefits of people who are just interesting to hunt and sell it.

The government resolution (264/2001) has established standard costs for the trophy hunting of Argali: US \$ 20.000 (of which: 14.000 is for the payment and 4.000 is for the fee) for Altai Argali, and US\$ 10.000 (of which: 7.000 is for the payment and 2.000 is for the fee) for Govi Argali. However, in practices, more income is generated for the hunters by selling the trophy to foreign hunters for much higher prices.

If the sustainable use of this species is not promoted, a number of illegal exploitation of the species will occur. Because certain apportions of Argali hunting are not allocated to local communities, there is an incentive for people to try to benefit from hunting the species rather than protect the species. However, if the majority of actual market prices for hunting were used and that money was invested in improving the living environment of local communities, the local communities would be more inclined to protect the species in order to ensure the sustainability. The legislative environment should be set up so such initiatives can be realized. It is thus necessary to make legal statements regarding the allocation of certain parts of income to serve the needs of local communities.

Additionally, certain amounts of income should be spent on the conservation of population and implementation of harvesting management. Payments are made to the state budget and it is legally stated that a certain percentage of it should be spent on environmental conservation. However, as of yet, nothing has been spent on the study and management of Argali Sheep.

All of the relevant information on Argali exploitation and conservation should be open for public and used for awareness and research purposes.

Information on hunting, protection and exploitation of other rare species should be compiled in one place, updated regularly, and widely used. However, there is still a lack of available information on the exploitation of Argali. For instance, right now it is necessary to plan conservation measures and activities based on analyzed data and information on numbers, dates, morphological measurements / dimensions and trade prices of hunted species. Unfortunately, no such Information Databank has been established. Therefore, a state hunting registration agency should be established as well as procedures to prohibit the export of trophies that are not registered by the agency.