

A NOTE RELATING TO SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE RE-INTRODUCED BLACKBUCK AT LAL SUHANRA IN BAHAWALPUR

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Blackbuck, *Antelope cervicapra* was once a native to Cholistan desert in Pakistan but became extinct by 1967 due to ruthless hunting. To introduce the species back, 10 animals were donated by World Wildlife Fund in 1970 which were kept in an enclosure having 518 ha area. Original stock of 10 blackbuck increased to 34 only by 1982 which is quite a slow progress.

To determine the probable handicaps, following investigations were carried out on the blackbuck, kept in the enclosure, in the perspective of its natural life:

Besides Cholistan, blackbuck was native to many places in India also where the conditions were favourable (Jerdon 1974). It has generally been accepted that blackbuck thrives best in places where the climate is not too moist, the temperature does not fall too low, the topography is not too rugged or soil sandy and vegetation is not too thick. Against this, the area enclosed for blackbuck at Lal Suhanra National Park has thick vegetation, sandy soil and a big water reservoir nearby. Also, there is great abundance of poisonous snakes within the enclosure.

Dense vegetation does not suit this antelope-firstly because these are xeric grazers favouring open plains and lightly wooded areas (Dharmakumarsinhji 1967) and secondly, sense of hearing and smell is not so highly developed in the blackbuck, they have thus to rely heavily upon eye sight in detecting danger (Mungall 1976) which is possible in the open only. Thick vegetation is therefore, a source of constant disturbance and render a blackbuck totally helpless when confronted suddenly by a predator.

Hooves of the blackbuck within the enclosure are overgrown enormously. It can develop such deformed hooves if kept on too soft a surface or if insufficiently active to maintain healthy wear (Mungall 1976). Elongated hooves may be troublesome to the animal in many ways-in escape, in courtship and mating and during gestation period. Soft ground and malnutrition seems to be the main reasons for this deformity.

Presence of a big water reservoir, spread over several hectares, near the enclosure is a source of greater humidity in the area and serves as a breeding place for millions of mosquitoes which are disease causing and annoying creatures.

It has been reported (Aleem, 1978) that several animals with in the enclosure died due to snake bites. All the three poisonous snakes viz; Cobra (*Naja tripudians*), Krait (*Bungaris caeruleus*) and the Viper (*Echis carinata*) are present with in the enclosure (Mirza, 1977). Amongst the 3 poisonous species, viper is the most abundant and harmful as they exhibit mimicry with its surrounding and the animal feeding on the under growth are bitten because they could not

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see them. It was determined (Aleem, 1978) that dunes in the National Park area had a very large frequency of rat holes as compared to flats. Since rat holes are not only used as hiding places by the snakes but also provide them with food, abundance of snakes in the enclosure can be again due to this particular habitat.

About 4 animals have so far been reported which died due to pneumonia. Causes for pneumonia in this particular case are not yet known but in cold weather, the energy required to digest the vegetation is greater than the energy received from it, this results in a negative nitrogen balance and ultimately, in death of the animal. Such losses can be avoided if the animals are fed on a high energy diet in the fall to build them up with depot fat to convert into available energy during winter cold. More study is, however, required to find out the causative agents for losses due to pneumonia.

It was estimated (Khan, 1973) that the carrying capacity of the enclosed area is 40 animals units. Temple (1976) suggests that six blackbuck are equivalent to one animal unit. Considering the above, it can be hoped that vegetation within the enclosure at Lal Suhanra can support many more animals but it is yet doubtful how substantially they contribute to total nutrition, even if maize is also considered which is provided as supplement food. In some areas of India blackbuck have been accused of maintaining themselves largely on the growing cereal crops, of which, wheat is named so often and to which it show a special preference (Dharmakumarsinhji 1967). It can thus be more fruitful if patches of wheat are planted and left standing in a selected site within the enclosure or; if gram is provided instead which has proved much useful in case of Nilgai and Hog deer in the Bahawalpur Zoo.

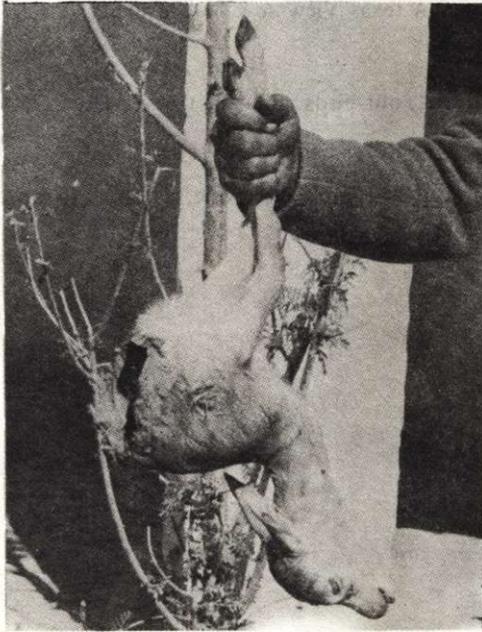
In its native habitat, blackbuck are preyed upon principally by Cheetah (Brander 1923, Gee 1969), wild pigs (Daniel 1967), wolves and smaller predators including jackals, foxes, eagles and pariah dogs (Baldwin 1876) and Caracal (Prakash 1975). Although, it was determined previously (Aleem, 1978) that the Lal Suhanra enclosure is free and safe from the predators but it is not so now. Several fawns were killed in the recent past by predators, mostly jackals and wild cats. On 21st February 1982, a 20 days old fawn was killed by a caracal cat. Posterior half of the fawn was found clear eaten alongwith all of the internal organs while head, neck and forelegs were still intact. The incident occurred early in morning and track study revealed that the fawn was attacked in open and dragged to a dense bush, about 30 meters away.

It can thus be concluded that improper habitat, occurrence of diseases, presence of snakes and predators, improper food and several other minor and major factors connected with the above and with the big water reservoir appear to be the probable causes for slow rate of increase in the blackbuck population at Lal Suhanra.

Present situation calls for an immediate and more rational decision about the fate of the blackbuck at Lal Suhanra so that it can live in a better and safe environment and aim for their re-introduction in Pakistan is fulfilled successfully.



A Galloping Blackbuck within the available habitat at Lal Suhanra



Caracal is met within the enclosure also



Dead Fawn – A victim of Caracal

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