Project Update: September 2005

Greetings from the top of the world! I will update you on what I have been doing up to date here in Sagarmatha. After staying some three weeks in Namche, I spent nine days in Thame valley (mean altitude 4,000 m), located in the north-west of Namche which is the main trading and tourist village in Sagarmatha National Park, east Nepal.

Thame may have been the first permanent human-inhabited valley where migrating snow leopard/s (from Tibet, Nangpa-La pass, 5,300 m) re-established their population in the 1980s. In this valley, we searched the signs of snow leopards within the area of approx. 20 km2 and located Himalayan tahr herds/groups. We got the evidence of only one snow leopard (pugmarks in four different places, n=4, fore-pugmark width 7.2 (SE=0.49) and length 7.6 (SE=0.87). Perhaps, another (bigger) individual may also roam this area, judging by its larger scrapes (we will verify its presence the next time we go there, i.e. sometimes in the fourth week of October 2005).

Although it's too early to conclude now, but Thame valley has lower numbers of snow leopards than either Namche or Phortse valley based on the numbers of signs and sign sites per km (2.2 signs/km and 1.2 sign sites/km, compared to, for example, in 2004 Phortse, with higher numbers of snow leopards, revealed 43 signs/km and 8.2 sign sites/km! Phortse had some four-snow leopard in 2004, and Namche only one, but we recorded some three here in Namche too this year!). Beyond Thame are broad valleys (undulating terrains that are more characteristics of west Nepal) on the way to Tibet (Nagpa-La pass) that may harbour some snow leopards and Himalayan tahr. We will visit this area sometimes in late October 2005.

Unlike in Namche/Khunde (three locations) and Phortse/Gokyo (three or four locations), we did not find any strategic location in Thame where snow leopard's visit is almost certain and hence could be trapped for satellite collaring for the long term monitoring and research program.

Although our data will verify it later, it seems that Himalayan tahr in Thame were less vigilant (n=45, more data points are needed here though) than in Phortse or Namche. Clearly, there are areas within Thame that differ in predation risk. Interestingly, kid-to-female ratio is comparatively better in this valley, i.e. approx. 0.6. The kid-to-female ratio (0.4) is not very encouraging in Namche this year too (pls be noted that this was worse in previous few years, i.e. 0.1), but let's hope that more kids may be produced within the next weeks of September. It's interesting to observe how this ratio (which is a crude way to estimate reproductive rate) changes over the next two months, i.e. by October when tahr will start rutting.

There are 3 main herds in Thame (total number not more than 40), but at times broken into 6 or 7 groups, mostly because snow leopards scare them, for example the herd of 14 was scattered into 4 groups on 31 October 2005 when a snow leopard (the same one which we tracked) visited their slopes. Very surprisingly, the Himalayan tahr population in Thame has only one yearling out of 12 females! Something is quite wrong here. I asked a few native herders as to what happened with all last years' kids, and one of them joked, snow leopards

gobbled up all! Perhaps we missed a female group with kids and yearlings, but we travelled (and/or scanned with binoculars and spotting scope) Thame valley (our area of 25 km2) very extensively, covering almost all accessible ridges, slopes and major and minor trails looking for these animals.

We spent often hours per day just to locate a group of tahr to observe their behaviours for an hour or two, and then lose them again in monsoonal clouds! Alas, no publishing journals would appreciate such an honest effort of a (mountain) field biologist who sometimes is forced to spend days in search of his/her animals in rugged mountain terrains, the days and hours which otherwise could have been used more productively. Sometimes the animals are just not there! In this respect, lucky and winners are those biologists who collect abundant data in laboratory settings or on zoo animals, and publish series of papers while a field biologist, drenched in sweats, keep scanning mountain slopes in (sometimes futile) search of animals.