

ECOVIGIL DEBATE OVER WHERE THE HANGUL BELONGS, TO DACHIGAM OR KISHTWAR?

Wildlife circles in Jammu and Kashmir are split wide open over a proposal to move the habitat of the endangered hangul.

MUFTI ISLAH reports

IS the Hangul safe at its ancestral home or in alien environs? A debate is raging in wildlife circles in Jammu and Kashmir after the state's Wildlife Department proposed to shift the endangered Kashmiri stag from Dachigam National Park to Kishtwar High Altitude National Park in Jammu province and two sanctuaries in Gulmarg and Obera.

The decision has got up the hackles of both Wildlife Department officials in Srinagar as well as wildlife experts. But Forest Minister Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Shah and N A Kitchloo, Regional Wildlife Warden, Kashmir, pleaded ignorance over the decision.

"I am not aware of what is happening. I was not consulted," says Forest Minister Shah.

Equally in the dark were two former heads of the department, A R Wani and Mir Inayatullah, renowned for their role in wildlife preservation.

The proposal has been forwarded to central and state governments after consulting scientists at the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India early this year. The WII, it is learnt, is studying the proposal.

According to the last count, the Hangul numbered 450-470, though experts feel the figures are exaggerated. They believe there are not more than 200 hanguls at Dachigam, the solitary habitat of the animal at present.

Apart from increased militancy and security presence in the upper and lower reaches of the Dachigam National Park,

officials cite two reasons for moving out the hangul: Increasing number of leopards which are preying on the hanguls, and the foot and mouth disease.

S D Savtantra, Chief Wildlife Warden, reasoned that since one wild cat kills two hanguls in one week at Dachigam, it is imperative to save the species from extinction.

It's absurd, counter wildlife experts.

"If there has been a global increase in the number of leopards as is being claimed, it should apply to Kishtwar and Gulmarg as well. If leopards can prey on hanguls at Dachigam, how can Kishtwar, which has reportedly more leopards, be safe?" asks an expert.

"Moreover, hanguls are adapted to the 141 sq km national park and are familiar with its habitat," he adds.

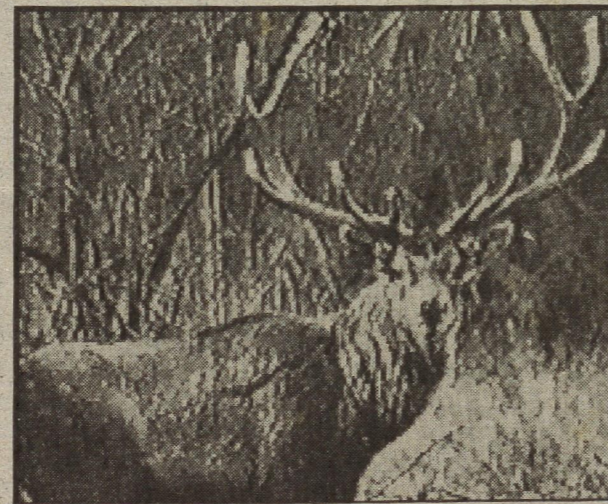
A R Wani asserts that Gulmarg was never a hangul habitat.

"Three decades back, the hangul habitat extended right from Kangan and Ganderbal upto Kishtwar, but over the last 15 years they have not gone ahead of Obera," he says.

"The arc has considerably reduced now and the Hanguls have adjusted to Dachigam, their sole summer abode," he adds.

Mir Inayatullah, former principal

A habitat for the hangul



chief conservator, also rebuffs the official line that the leopard population has swelled. "What's happening is that the incidence of leopard attacks on human habitation has increased," he explains, adding why more and more people and canines are being attacked at Nishat, Harwan along the Zabarwan range.

More than a dozen incidents of leopard attack have been reported in the Zabarwan range neighbouring the national park. "A leopard prefers a dog to a hangul, partly because it is easier to hunt," says Wani.

Dr Mir Mansoor, senior veterinarian in the wildlife department, concurs. "I have conducted post-mortems of a few leopards, but there has not been a single case of a hangul being attacked in the wild. No autopsy of a hangul has been

carried out the since last one year."

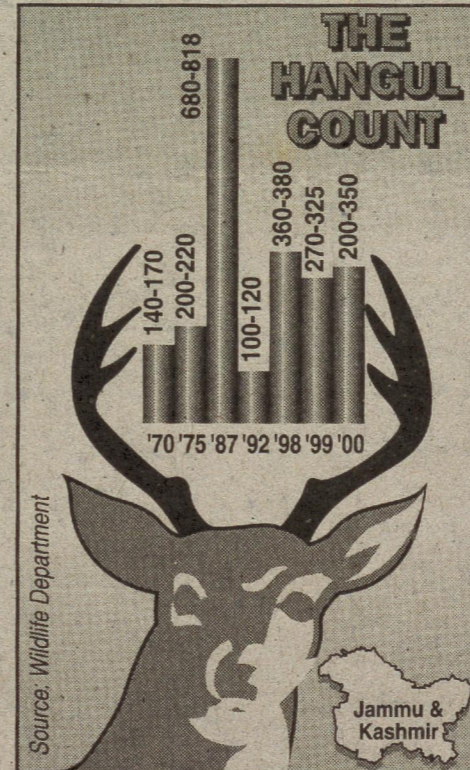
Experts also don't buy the other reason for moving out the hangul, the foot and mouth disease.

"The foot and mouth disease has been endemic in Jammu and Kashmir. It's no different this year," says another veterinarian, adding grazing has neither been stopped at Dachigam nor at Kishtwar. "If the cattle of Gujjars graze at Dachigam, so do they at Gulmarg, Kishtwar or any other pastures," he says.

Though experts maintain that relocation of animals are welcome, they say in the case of the hangul, a holistic study, preferably by an international agency, should be carried out first, which should be followed by captive breeding.

"The norm is when you want to re-introduce a species, you breed it in semi-wild conditions. Then, the species is put in observation for at least a couple of years, but in this case, the department is doing everything in a hurry," an expert told *The Indian Express*.

Citing the instance of the one-horned rhinoceros which was to be introduced at Doodwah Park, Taraia in Uttar Pradesh, he says that even after two years, the five rhinos from Assam and Nepal have not been able to suit-



Source: Wildlife Department

IE Graphics/B.K. Sharma

ably adjust to their new habitat.

"To introduce a species in a new environment, it is imperative that exhaustive research and proper monitoring is done for several years. Just talking to Wildlife Institute of India (WII) people does not help. The government should try to revive the defunct research wing in the state if it wants to stop the extinction of the species," he adds.

Kashir channel to be shifted to Srinagar

ANURADHA RAMAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 23

TWO years after it made a formal debut on January 26, 1998, the Kashir channel, which was being supervised by senior officials in Mandi House, is likely to be relocated to Srinagar.

Sources say the shift of power from Mandi House to Srinagar is the result of a long-standing demand by the channel's producers as well as intellectuals of the state, who wanted operational control of the channel. The channel's content is currently being determined and cleared by officials in the special Kashmir cell in Mandi House. The Centre had worked out an elaborate plan with a special annual allocation of Rs 100 crore for software and hardware.

While the channel was plagued by a perennial resource crunch, there was a more serious charge of corruption and partiality against senior Doordarshan officials. So much so that producers from Srinagar alleged that programmes

were being gifted away to non-Kashmiris who were yet to cut their teeth producing programmes for television. Even with talks about a shift, officials have voiced concern about the channel falling into wrong hands.

Ever since it became operational, the channel has attracted attention and criticism for the way it was being managed from Delhi. While the channel was started to counter propaganda from Pakistan's PTV, so far it has not even been able to hold viewers' attention, let alone succeed in weaning them away from PTV which still continues to be popular in the Valley, especially in the remote and inaccessible areas of Kashmir. To add to this, local producers in the Valley resented the manner in which officials from Delhi dictated terms to them.

While senior officials in Mandi House said they were looking into the possibility of handing over charge to the Srinagar Kendra, the modalities of running the channel are yet to be worked out.